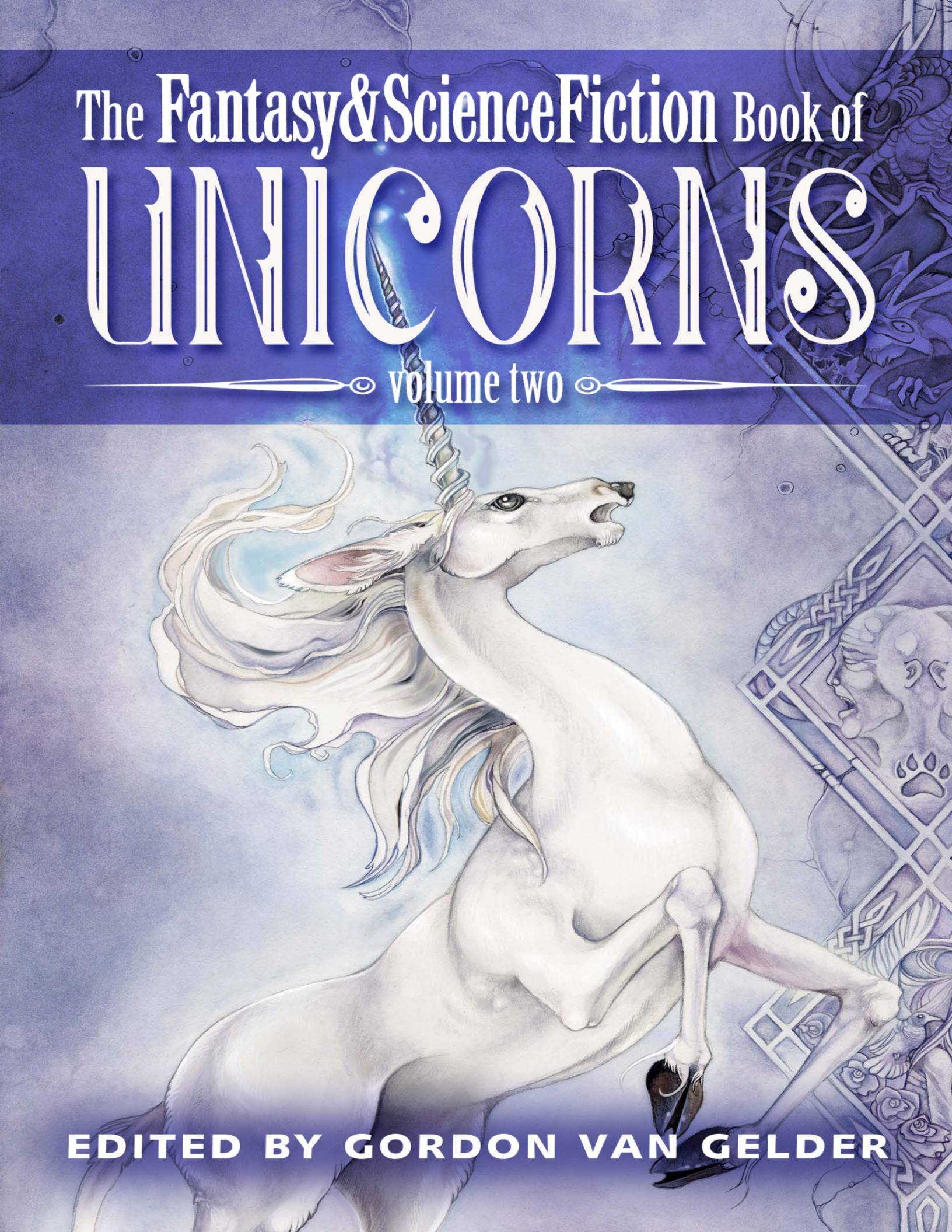
The Fantasy & Science Fiction Book of UNICORNS

volume two



EDITED BY GORDON VAN GELDER

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TACHYON
SAN FRANCISCO

The *Fantasy & Science Fiction* Book of Unicorns, Volume 2
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For

David Hartwell

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The Black Horn

Jack Dann

FROM HIS OCEANFRONT room on the tenth floor of the Hotel Casablanca, Judge Stephen Steiner saw the unicorn standing in the shallow end of the swimming pool below. It was almost four in the morning, and most of the Christmas tree lights of the gambling ships three miles out on the ocean had been turned off. The expanse of beach ahead was dark and ominous, except for a single light that burned to the left on the beach that belonged to the Fontainebleau Hotel. But the Casablanca pool was illuminated by green and red underwater lights, giving the breeze-blown surface of the water an almost luminary quality, as of melted, rippling gems.

The unicorn looked grayish in the light, although surely it was white, and large, at least eighteen hands high from poll to hoof. Its mane was dark and shaggy; and at first Steiner thought it was a horse. But how strange to see a horse running loose on the beach at such an hour. There must be *laws* prohibiting animals from running loose, he thought. Miami Beach is a densely populated area . . . surely there must be a law. Perhaps this horse had run away from its owner . . . perhaps it was part of a road show . . . a circus.

My God, Steiner mused, how long has it been since *I've* been to a circus. . . ?

It was then that Steiner noticed that the horse had a horn protruding from its wide forehead. He hadn't noticed it before because the horn was black . . . and also perhaps he didn't see it because he'd *assumed* he was looking at a horse, and horses didn't have horns. But now Steiner could see that horn. It looked like black marble. It was long and fluted and would make a vicious weapon. The horn reflected the green and red light as if the light were oil flowing along its conch-like spirals.

The unicorn dipped its horn into the pool, as if to neutralize some chlorine poison in the water, and then drank.

Steiner reached for his glasses, although he didn't really need them for distance. It couldn't be, he thought, yet there it was. Perhaps it was some advertising gimmick, but Steiner discounted that thought immediately. No one would let an animal run loose at this time of night, horned or otherwise.

Then the animal raised its head, as if sensing that it was being watched. It blew air through its muzzle and looked up at the building, slowly turning its head, scanning the windows on one story, then going on to another, until finally it seemed that the unicorn had found him. It seemed to be looking right *at* him, and Steiner felt transfixed, even through the thick, protective pane of glass. The unicorn knew he was there.

It was looking at *him.*

Steiner felt drawn to it . . . it was as beautiful as a childhood fantasy. Yet there was something dangerous and even sinister about it; its very being challenged Steiner's reason, and Steiner himself. Steiner felt an almost uncontrollable urge to smash through the window and jump . . . as if by some sort of television magic he'd be able to leap through the glass and land on the unicorn's back.

He found himself pressing dangerously hard against the plate-glass window as he stared down at the animal below that was still as stone, watching him.

Suddenly he *wanted* to jump.

"No!" he cried, feeling sudden, reeling terror, for he knew in that instant that if he could have jumped, he would have. It was as if he had glimpsed his own death deep in the eyes of that beautiful horned stallion staring up at him from the pool.

He turned away from the window and closed his eyes tightly, so tightly that everything turned purple for an instant. Then, slowly, he turned back toward the window. There was nothing there, just the metal lounge chairs situated around the illuminated pool, and the dark beach and ocean stretching into flat darkness. He looked to his left, toward the dimly lit Fontainebleau beach, but there was no sign of anything there, either.

Steiner closed the curtains and sat down on his uncomfortable double bed. His hands were shaking. He reached for a bottle of kosher brandy on the nightstand beside him and took a shot right out of the tinted green bottle. The stuff tasted like hell; it was coarse, not made as well as in the past—or perhaps he just remembered the past as being better in all respects.

He suddenly thought of his wife, Grace, who had died six months ago, God rest her sweet soul. Although he had been separated from her for over ten years, she had waited . . . waited for him to come back home. But he just couldn't have gone back. Grace would have been a constant reminder of everything Steiner feared. He needed younger women to feed his ego . . . to be in awe of him. They all probably thought he had money, but they were his only barricade against the fustiness of old age . . . against death itself. They kept him feeling young.

He felt the old guilt weighing down upon him. Grace, I'm sorry . . .

The air conditioner was on; it suddenly felt cold in the room. The graft on Steiner's back, where he had had a melanoma removed, hurt him tonight.

He'd inquire tomorrow at the desk whether there were any reports of a horse running loose. It *was* a horse, Steiner told himself, as he lay his head against the lumpy, overlarge pillow.

But he couldn't fall back to sleep.

After morning prayers in the makeshift synagogue on the fourth floor of the hotel, Steiner met his three sisters for breakfast. He escorted them to their table on the eastern side of the grand old dining room, which overlooked the beach and the perfectly blue ocean beyond. The table was prepared, and their waitress was waiting to attend them. Behind each setting was a glass of borsch mixed with sour cream. An unopened box of egg matzoth stood in the center of the table, as prominent as a bouquet of freshly cut flowers.

Steiner sat each of his sisters and then himself.

It was Passover, and Cele and Kate and Mollie had decided it would be better for Steiner if they all spent the holiday together at a hotel. Steiner could not disappoint them . . . somehow he would get through it. Although Cele was quite well off, she lived with her two sisters in Flatbush. Those two counted their pennies as if they were all being chased by the specter of relief. But Cele would spend her money for a good cause, especially if it involved family and religion . . . so this was a real vacation for them. And who knew how long Steiner might have them, anyway? Cele was the youngest, and she was seventy-seven.

Steiner was five years her junior. . . .

“It’s another *beautiful* day,” Cele said brightly, placing her green linen napkin on her lap. She wore a crisp red flowerpot hat that matched her square-shouldered jacket with patch pockets. It was as if she had never left the 1940s. Her dyed blonde hair was combed down smoothly, and tightly rolled up at the ends, and she was growing a bit thin on top. She had a long, oval face with great blue eyes, the same lively eyes that used to tease Steiner sixty years ago. Cele was going to make the best of her vacation in the sun. “Don’t you think so, Stephen? Isn’t it a beautiful day? Of course, you *live* here in Florida, so sunshine is probably old hat to you.”

Steiner managed a smile, but he was in a disagreeable mood. Two hours of sitting and standing and praying with a congregation of evil-smelling, doddering old men had sapped him of all joie de vivre . . . had soured his morning. Although Steiner had always prided himself on being a religious man—he donned his prayer shawl and phylacteries every morning to pray toward the east, and it was to just that habit that he attributed what wealth and fame and good fortune he had acquired over the years—he couldn’t *stand* being around old people. It was as simple as that. Steiner glanced uncomfortably around the room. Just sitting in the dining room made his flesh crawl—this entire hotel seemed to be filled with the most Orthodox and the oldest of Jews. Association could kill you . . . *would* kill you. Make your flesh shrivel right up. That was another reason why Steiner had never gone back home; even before his beloved Grace had died, she smelled of the grave. Her skin had turned wrinkled and dry, and she exhuded an odor that could not be concealed by even the most expensive perfume.

He turned to Mariana, his waitress, who was ready to take their orders. Her very presence lightened his mood. She was Brazilian, dark, strong-featured, with full lips and tilted green eyes; her wiry black hair, though disguised in a bun, was long. She couldn’t be more than twenty-one, the epitome of youth itself. Steiner flashed her a smile and ordered breakfast for his sisters and himself. He felt as if he were swelling up, regaining everything he had lost upstairs in the synagogue; and he heard a pompous affectation come into his voice, which was rather loud and bombastic, but he couldn’t help himself . . . and anyway, a fine, articulated sentence had *always* impressed the young ladies.

When Mariana left and the busboy was out of earshot, Steiner’s sister Kate said, “You know, Stephen, you make a fool out of yourself talking like

that to the waitress." Kate was two years older than Cele, and she seemed to bear a grudge against any woman under sixty . . . or so Steiner thought. Kate had once been beautiful, high-breasted and thin-waisted, but now she had become puffy. She dyed her hair orange-red. Steiner nicknamed her "the Flying Nun" because she wrapped paper around her hair every night so it wouldn't muss.

"I'll thank you to mind your own business, ma'am," Steiner said stiffly, still using the artificial inflection he used with people he wished to impress. Cele gave Kate a nasty look and shook her head. Mollie, who was the oldest, didn't seem to be listening; instead she began talking about her children, who were supposed to visit her the week after Passover.

"Well, he *does* make a fool out of himself," Kate said to Cele.

"Stephen's right," Cele said, speaking sharply but in a low voice. "Mind your business."

"We can't even talk to each other around here," Kate said petulantly, as she smoothed out the napkin on her lap. Kate was overdressed in a silk gauze summer dress trimmed with black; she also wore a small pillbox hat with a veil.

"Why are you wearing a veil this morning?" Steiner asked. "You look like you're still in mourning."

"Well, I am . . . and you should be, too!" Then she caught herself. "I'm sorry, Stephen. I'm just not myself this morning—"

"On the contrary, you're very much yourself this morning," Mollie interrupted. Mollie wore a tan suit and blouse. Her hair was gray and frizzy, and she had a crinkly, Irish-looking face.

"Mollie, shut up," Kate said, and then continued talking to Steiner. "I didn't sleep well last night at all. I have a canker sore or something in my mouth, and my whole jaw's killing me. I don't even think I'll be able to eat."

"Oh, she'll eat," Mollie said sarcastically.

"And for your information"—Kate was still talking to Steiner—"I'm wearing a hat because this is a religious hotel, and religious women are supposed to wear hats. I can't help it if the hat has a veil."

"She's right, Stephen," Cele said. "Look around, all the women are wearing hats." She self-consciously adjusted her own hat.

“Of course I’m right,” Kate said softly, indicating by her tone of voice that she was willing to drop the argument.

Mariana brought the food, purposely serving Stephen first, which stimulated a tssing from Kate. Steiner teased the waitress by telling her how beautiful she looked, and she blushed and backed away.

Cele changed the subject by saying, “I think we should all sit by the pool when we’re finished with breakfast. That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m going upstairs,” Kate said. “I’m not feeling at all well.”

“Kitty, you can take me upstairs with you,” Mollie said. She was slightly infirm, and had trouble navigating stairs by herself.

“I think we should *all* spend at least a few minutes together in the sun,” Cele said firmly—although she was the youngest, except for Steiner, *she made* all the decisions for her sisters.

“He shouldn’t be out in the sun with his cancer,” Kate said petulantly.

“You see, there she goes again,” Mollie said to Cele. “Always starting something.”

Cele flashed Kate a nasty look, and Mollie seemed pleased with herself. Then Cele said in a calm, quiet voice, “The morning sun is not dangerous, I’m told . . . it’s the afternoon sun that has the dangerous rays.”

Steiner nodded without paying much attention, but he always sided with Cele. She had enough of a cross to bear, living with and supporting her two sisters. He looked up and smiled generously at Mariana as she cleared the table. He could see the tiny dark hairs bristling on her arms, and could smell her slightly pungent, musk-like odor. She returned his smile, her cheeks dimpling, and for an instant their eyes met. Steiner felt his heart pump faster . . . felt his glands open up. He imagined making love to her . . . imagined her naked and holding him like a baby in a dimly lit bedroom. She would be beautiful naked, he thought, daydreaming about how she would look with her hair undone and hanging loose down her bare back. She would look like a wild animal. . . .

She’s a perfect madonna, he thought . . . but then he had thought that about every waitress and shop clerk and hatcheck and typist he had ever dated. Perhaps later, when his sisters went upstairs for their afternoon nap, he’d work up the courage to go into the hotel kitchen and ask her out. He could buy her a tall, lemony drink by the pool, talk to her in whispers, caress her, and then take her back to her apartment. . . .

That thought alone gave him the strength to take his sisters outside to the pool, where they could gab and complain and gossip in Yiddish with their newfound octogenarian friends and neighbors.

Steiner did not go upstairs with his sisters, but made the excuse that he wished to take some more sun and maybe a walk before going inside. Cele seemed a bit agitated that he would get sick from *too* much sun, but he promised to sit in the shade near the cabanas. Steiner felt nothing but claustrophobic in the presence of his sisters.

"I wouldn't mind taking a walk myself," Cele said, standing over him and looking forlornly out to sea.

"Come, we'll take a walk now down Collins Avenue, and then you can sit in the sun if you really want to."

"Well, *I* have to go upstairs," Mollie said. "My feet are *killing me*."

Kate, who had wanted to go upstairs earlier, now said, "I wouldn't mind taking a walk and doing some window-shopping. It might be good for me, make me forget how much my jaw is aching me."

"Well, I can take Mollie upstairs and—" Cele said, but she gave up in mid-sentence, accepting her responsibility to her sisters. Steiner could see the trapped frustration in her face. "All right," she said resignedly, "I suppose we should just go upstairs. . . ."

"I'll take a walk with you, Stephen," Kate said.

"Either we'll *all take* a walk or we'll all go upstairs together," Cele said, her hands gently shaking, whether from age or anger, Steiner didn't know. But he felt guilty, for he had sacrificed Cele to them just so he could be alone . . . Cele deserved better than that. The poor old girl. . . .

But Steiner was on his feet as soon as his sisters disappeared into the side entrance of the hotel. It's too hot out here anyway, he told himself, sweating under his polyester powder-blue shirt and matching slacks. He wore a white jacket and white loafers. As he passed, the gossips and wrinkled sunbathers nodded to him and said, "Good morning, Judge."

Steiner hadn't been a judge for thirty years, and even then had served only one term. But Steiner liked the title—it opened "doors" for him. Everyone called him "Judge" at the very exclusive Boca Club, where he was a member. In fact, he had had the heraldic blue and white and gold

emblem sewed on all his sports jackets. Of course, he didn't attend very many functions there, as they were very expensive. But he had been known to take his dates to the club for swanky luncheons. Perhaps Mariana would visit him at his home in Fort Lauderdale, and he could take her, too. . . .

He was immersed in that daydream as he stepped through the coffee shop beside the pool area and into the large kitchen behind. There were busboys and waiters and waitresses bustling around, carrying large aluminum trays in and out of the two wide swinging doors that led into the dining area. Cooks and helpers were working at sinks and long wooden tables. Squashed prunes and apples and matzo brie and puddles of soup and juice and coffee discolored the white tile floor.

Mariana stepped backward into the kitchen, pushing the door open. She was holding a tray filled with glasses and dishes and silverware.

"Mariana!" Steiner said, overly loud. She turned to him, looking surprised, but no one else seemed to notice his presence . . . or care.

She put the heavy tray down on one of the tables and said, "Yes, Judge? Is something wrong?" She tilted her head in a most attractive manner, Steiner thought.

"Yes . . . I just thought—" and suddenly the words left him. He felt awkward and foolish . . . and suddenly paranoid that she would think he was a "dirty old man." But that was plain stupid! he told himself. She doesn't even know why I'm here yet. "Do you have any plans for this evening?" he blurted out. But even as he spoke, he realized that he had lost the advantage entirely . . . that now *she* was in the position of power.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Judge," she said, looking uncomfortable. "I'll be taking care of your table tonight, is that—"

"No . . . I mean, would you care to have a drink with me *after* dinner, after you've finished working. Perhaps we could meet at the Fontainebleau . . . by the bar. It's very nice there."

"Well . . . I don't know." She was actually blushing. *That's* a good sign.

"I'll be waiting for you at poolside at ten o'clock," Steiner said with authority, feeling much better about the venture now.

"I'm really not supposed to be going out with the guests," she said coyly, her eyes averted from his. "I could get fired, and—"

"Well . . . *I'll* be waiting for you at"—Steiner looked at his thin gold watch for effect—"ten o'clock sharp."

“I’ve really got to get back to work, please. . . .”

“Ten o’clock,” Steiner said smartly, using his best judicial tone. Mariana nodded once, shyly, her eyes still averted from his.

Steiner turned heel back to the pool area.

Once outside, back in the sun, he felt relieved and full of nervous energy. He felt like a schoolboy dreaming about the girl he was going to take to the senior prom. He couldn’t stand the thought of going back to his room or sitting in the hotel lobby, which smelled of old age and was filled with urns of fake flowers and plants. He couldn’t bear to look at another old man or woman. He couldn’t sleep, and he had just eaten.

He just wanted to be alone and daydream. . . .

He found himself walking along the sand toward the ocean. Perhaps he’d walk along the beach to the Fontainebleau, have a drink, and then return down Collins Avenue, thus making a circle. But once he reached the Fontainebleau and saw the pool and bar to his left, he just didn’t feel like stopping. He was too filled with energy to stop and sit, so he continued walking, enjoying the brisk breeze coming off the ocean, the healthy smell of the salt air, and the pounding of the surf just inches away from his sand-encrusted white loafers. He dreamed about Mariana . . . and imagined himself as a young man courting her, a young man with thick black hair and a strong, handsome face. A strong man eyed by every bikini-clad woman he passed. . . .

But Steiner was beginning to swelter in the afternoon heat. The sun was unbearable, and Steiner had misjudged how much of it he could take. The ocean breeze, which was at first cool and refreshing, now felt hot and muggy. He turned around and started back to his hotel.

Thank goodness he didn’t have far to go.

Steiner wouldn’t have seen the unicorn if it hadn’t made a snorting noise as he passed. It stood behind a dozen one-man red and white sailboats leaning against against an old pier that was in disrepair. It stood in the shadows, as if to cool off.

The unicorn carefully stepped out from the boats and gazed at Steiner with its ocean-blue eyes. It pawed the sand with its heel, sending ribbons of sand into the air to be carried away on the wind.

Steiner stopped, transfixed again by the unicorn. He broke out in a sweat, but it was cold sweat, and from fear rather than heat. “What do you *want*?” he asked, feeling foolish talking to an animal like this, but he had to break the spell with *something* . . . a word, the sound of his voice. Suddenly Steiner was aware of a myriad of tiny details: the soft pinkness of the unicorn’s muzzle; the white whiskers growing out of its chin and nostrils; its coarse, shaggy white mane and fetlocks; its cloven hooves worn from the sand; and the strange, ridged black horn that looked as if it had somehow erupted from the animal’s forehead. In fact, it looked glassy, as if it might have indeed been formed from lava. In the bright sunlight it took on a reddish sheen, which seemed to deepen at the tip. Steiner was acutely aware of the splashing and gurgling of the surf, but he couldn’t make out any *human* sounds, except for his own quickened breathing. This was an empty stretch of beach. Steiner was shaking, and he felt weak. The animal was so *large*. It looked like a huge Morgan, with its muscular back, strong neck, and large head. It stood square, its legs right under its shoulders. The unicorn was overpowering . . . yet it *seemed* to be gentle. It didn’t move, but seemed to be made of porcelain and coal. It just stared at Steiner; and it was as if the unicorn’s eyes were blue magnets pulling him closer . . . and Steiner imagined how it would be to ride this great beast, to feel its bulk beneath him and the wind whistling in his ears and the salt spray biting his chest and face. He could ride it along the beach . . . along the ocean.

The unicorn took a cautious step toward Steiner.

Suddenly Steiner remembered last night and broke the reverie. He stepped back in terror, almost falling over his own feet. The unicorn took on an entirely different guise as Steiner remembered how he had wanted to jump from his window at the mere sight of the beast. The unicorn—as if reading Steiner’s thoughts—whinnied and pawed the sand. Then, ready to charge, it lowered its head.

The sharp black horn was pointed directly at Steiner.

And Steiner saw the unicorn for what it was: death. Death in its simplest, most beautiful guise. “No,” he whispered to the beast. “No!” he screamed, hating it. He turned from the unicorn and ran, his narrow-toed Italian white loafers heeling into the soft sand. His eyes burned and seemed to go out of focus as he ran. His heart felt as if it were pounding in his throat. He could

hear the unicorn behind him. He could *feel* the unicorn's horn at his back, ready to slash him wide open.

But Steiner wasn't ready for death. He wanted to live. He *had* to live. If death was going to take him, it would have to take him on the run. Steiner wasn't going to make it easy. He wasn't going to slip into any eternal slumber with a toothless good-bye. Not Steiner.

He ran as hard as he could, the blood pulsing in his chest and head, making him dizzy, until he tripped over a tangled, polished piece of driftwood and fell headlong into the sand. He turned backward, resolved to face death with his eyes open.

But the unicorn was gone . . . disappeared. There were no tracks, except for his own, no outline of equine heel or bar or furrow in the soft white sand. Steiner tried to catch his breath. He felt at once relieved and anxious. He *had* been chased by something. His breathing began to return to normal, but he had a flash of searing pain in his abdomen, and his arms and shoulders felt heavy and began to ache. He broke out into a cold sweat. He felt clammy and chilled and nauseated. It was the fall, he told himself . . . and the exercise. He hadn't run like that in forty years.

But one thing was certain: he *had* seen a horse with a horn. It might have been some sort of publicity trick, but it was no hallucination. Steiner wasn't the type to hallucinate. He might have had some crazy thoughts when the beast was chasing him, but then, who wouldn't? He felt foolish, running as he had. The damned thing obviously hadn't been chasing him, or he would have seen it when he had turned around. Actually, if it had *really* been chasing him it would have run him through with that horn in no time flat.

Still . . . it *had* to be some sort of publicity stunt, Steiner thought.

Steiner told his sisters he wasn't feeling very well and stayed in his room. He forced himself to take a swallow of brandy and tried to sleep, but he felt feverish. Frenzied, unconnected thoughts flashed through his mind. He tucked himself under the covers. The pain seemed to lift.

I'm *not* crazy, he thought, raising himself up on his right elbow to gaze below. The ocean was turquoise green in the shallows and deep cyan blue farther out. The sun was bright and warm and reassuring. Although no one was swimming in the pool, there were over thirty people sitting in deck

chairs and chatting while others walked about. Everything was perfectly all right, exactly as it should be, as ordinary as bread.

Then Steiner saw the unicorn lift its head out of the ocean.

At first, he thought he was seeing a wave, a distant whitecap, but there was no mistaking that black fluted horn. There were those blue eyes and thick white mane and muscular neck. The unicorn rose out of the water, revealing itself little by little as it moved into the shallows, until the water was only up to its knees and it walked forward, kicking, lifting its long legs out of the water, onto the beach. The unicorn was dripping wet and as big as life. It stood on the edge of the empty beach and looked up at Steiner, as foamy water purled past its hooves. It *knew* Steiner was there. It had come for him again.

"Go away!" he shouted, as he shakily got up from his bed. As the pain began to radiate into his shoulders and arms and chest, he pulled the curtains closed.

But he knew the unicorn was still out there, waiting. . . .

Steiner felt much better by dinnertime. He had rested, and the aching in his arms and chest was gone, as were the sweats and fever. Steiner was prone to night sweats, anyway. He was apprehensive about opening the heavy curtains, so he left well enough alone . . . he had had enough excitement for one day.

He dressed informally in tan shirt and slacks and went downstairs to pick up a newspaper in the lobby. He leafed through it outside the shabby hotel shop that sold magazines, newspapers, aspirin, suntan lotions, cheap trinkets, and sunglasses. He was disappointed—there wasn't even a mention of a circus, or a carnival, or a runaway horse . . . or a unicorn. Well, *someone* must have seen the damn thing, too, he thought. Surely, it will be in *tomorrow's* papers.

He put the newspaper back on the rack and met his sisters for dinner in the dining room. He felt a bit hesitant about seeing Mariana before their forthcoming tryst at the Fontainebleau, but it couldn't be avoided. If he *didn't* show up for dinner, she might think he was ill or not interested, and she might not meet him later. Still, he felt uncomfortable. But when she

took his order, and Steiner smiled at her, she returned it. She even blushed. That made Steiner feel very good indeed.

Everything else went along as it had for the past five days. Cele and Kate and Mollie discussed the menu and chose each dish with care, but when the food actually came, each one complained bitterly that she should have ordered a different entrée. Kate complained about her sore mouth. Mollie talked about her children and "the grandkids" and told Cele that the veal was the wrong color.

After dinner and a wink at Mariana, Steiner accompanied his sisters to the obligatory 7:30 show in the ballroom, where the hotel rabbi—a slick stand-up comedian, who had made records and played the Catskills every year—was performing. Steiner didn't listen to the stale jokes. He kept glancing at his watch. After the show, he kissed his sisters good night and went to his room to change into fresh, more formal clothes for his date with Mariana. He felt a bit weak and dizzy, but he was determined to go out tonight, as if he had to prove something to himself.

As he entered the room, he examined himself in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. He had a shock of white hair, which was yellowed a bit in the back; deep brown eyes; a thin nose; and a full, sensual mouth—it was a strong, angular face that had loosened with age. Although the face-lift two years ago had helped, lines still mapped his face. But he certainly didn't look his age.

He began to feel anxious here in the room, but he made a point of not going near the closed curtains. He could hear the faint murmur of the surf; it was like gentle white noise. He wondered if the unicorn was still out there as he changed into a smart-looking chocolate-brown suit with a matching tie and a white-on-white shirt. His brogues were a bit scuffed; he reminded himself to buy polish. He concentrated on small details.

But he couldn't leave the room this time without finding out if the unicorn was still out there. He pulled open the drapes and looked out the salt-stained window . . . he looked by the pool and on the beaches . . . he looked at the white-crested black waves of the ocean.

The pool area and the beach were empty.

There was not a unicorn to be seen.

Steiner took a small table in front of the enclosed driftwood bar poolside at the Fontainebleau. The pool was huge and kidney-shaped, and Steiner enjoyed a tall whiskey and soda while he watched floodlit water cascading down a stonework waterfall into the pool. Palms were spaced around the pool area, and green and blue lights gave the place a festive, romantic atmosphere. To his left were the glass doors that led into the Fontainebleau shopping center; to his right, across an expanse of lawn, was the new ten-story addition to the hotel. Cozy paths wound their way between palmettos and hibiscuses, and the ocean was a dull, dark pounding behind him. Guests in evening clothes, in jeans and tube tops, in bathing suits and clogs, in gaudy slacks and Hawaiian shirts promenaded past him. Two callow-looking, teenaged lovers walked by, hand in hand, followed by a small group of executives and their wives. The whole world seemed to be carved into *twos*. But Steiner felt strong with excitement and anticipation; he felt dashing, good-looking, if just a trifle tired.

As he sat, waiting, two women who looked to be in their late thirties sat down at the wooden table beside him. One was dumpy-looking and plump; she wore clogs, white Bermuda shorts that were too tight for her, and a very revealing pink halter top. Her hair was blonde and coarse, obviously bleached. Her companion, in contrast, looked quite demure. She was tall and skinny, with short-cropped brown hair and a long, hollow-cheeked face. She wore a blue outfit—a blue blazer and a pleated white and blue skirt which was actually quite stylish. But she had the worst teeth that Steiner had ever seen. Her two front teeth were long and crooked and widely spaced, and one protruded beyond the other. Obviously, they should have been pulled long ago. She must be a country girl, Steiner thought. Country people don't take care of their teeth . . . they hate dentists.

Steiner ignored the women and waited for Mariana. He gazed at the path that led from the shopping center: the direction that Mariana should be coming from. He sipped his drink and eavesdropped on the conversation of the men at the bar. From what he could overhear, they were microprocessor executives from Atlanta here on a convention. They talked mostly about getting laid.

The blonde woman kept smiling at the men at the bar. To Steiner's surprise, the ploy worked, because when the waitress came to take her order, one of the men insisted on buying the blonde woman a drink. He was

rather good-looking in an athletic sort of way . . . what the hell would he want with someone like *that*? Steiner mused. Steiner couldn't help but stare. The man sat down, winked at his friends at the bar, and put his arm around the back of the blonde woman's chair. She was cooing and shifting about, smiling and nuzzling closer to the man as introductions were made. The other woman craned her long neck slightly to join in the conversation, but she looked uncomfortable, although she was the type who *always* looks uncomfortable. Steiner watched the executive lean forward to get a better look at the blonde's breasts; but Steiner was caught staring by the tall woman, who was looking directly at him. She smiled at him without revealing her teeth. Steiner nodded curtly and turned away.

That's *all I* need, he told himself. But he was getting anxious. Where *was* Mariana, anyway? It's ten o'clock already. I was a fool not to have gotten her home phone number. Dammit! Perhaps I can call the hotel . . . she just might be working late. Steiner called from the bar, where the rest of the men were taking bets on whether their friend would get laid or not. Steiner watched the burly executive making his pass at the blonde. Then Mr. Lareina, the maître d', came to the phone and told Steiner that Mariana had left shortly after nine. "All right, thanks," Steiner said and hung up. He wasn't going to abase himself by asking for her home phone—Lareina wouldn't give it out, anyway.

Steiner sat back down at his table. He felt dazed. He brooded and stared out at the pastel-lit path leading to the Fontainebleau. Perhaps Mariana went home first to change.

Then he saw her. He straightened up in his chair, and waved excitedly to the dark-haired woman approaching the pool area. She was walking quickly on high heels, as if late for an appointment. Steiner felt a warm rush of anticipation. He started to get up as she approached . . . and only then realized that she *wasn't* Mariana. Up close, she didn't look like Mariana at all. She looked quizzically at Steiner, who was half out of his chair.

Steiner was mortified. He sat down reflexively. How could I have made such a mistake? he asked himself. He thought about going home, slinking away, crawling into his cool, uncomfortable bed, but he just *couldn't leave*. Mariana *had* to show. He *wouldn't* be stood up! Pain began to radiate once again throughout his arms and shoulders, then down into his chest.

“Girl troubles?” asked the skinny woman sitting at the table beside Steiner. She had a thin, reedy voice.

Steiner turned toward her. “I *beg* your pardon,” he said, annoyed.

The woman tried to smile without revealing her teeth. “Your friend . . . she might just be late, that’s all,” she said nervously. But she was persistent. “Why don’t you have a drink with *us*? We’ll cheer you up, we’re good company . . . and here I am a third wheel. Help us out.”

“Thank you kindly, but I don’t think so,” Steiner said. The skinny woman pouted, an exaggerated moue.

“Oh, c’mon, buddy, *I’ll* buy you a drink,” the executive said as he self-consciously ran his hand through his short-cropped hair. But Steiner knew his type, all right. He had probably been a bully when he was a kid, and a ROTC lieutenant in the army, and now he’s some sort of zipperhead IBM-type manager who makes life hell for everyone under him. He was obviously looking for a way to cut the blonde away from her friend, and he was trying to use Steiner as a foil. “C’mon, what the hell,” the man said, flashing a boyish smile, and he jumped his chair toward Steiner and then pulled his table over until it was touching Steiner’s. The blonde woman laughed when the drinks spilled, and then she and her friend moved their chairs closer, too. Steiner was too embarrassed to do anything but accept the situation. He felt even more uncomfortable with the skinny woman pressing close to his elbow.

The executive waved down the waitress, and Steiner ordered another drink, which he didn’t need . . . he was achy and dizzy as it was, and his right arm felt numb. “So, friend, where do you hail from?” the man asked Steiner as he massaged the blonde’s arm, purposely letting his fingers brush against her breast. The skinny woman leaned closer to Steiner, as if expecting him to answer in a whisper.

“I’m from upstate New York,” Steiner said. “Binghamton.” He felt his skin crawl. The woman was *too* close to him. She smelled of cheap perfume, and she had chicken skin. God . . . he could imagine what she *really* smelled like.

“Is that so,” the skinny woman said. “I’ve been through there. I used to live in Milford, Pennsylvania. Small world, isn’t it?”

Steiner didn’t have anything to say to that; he just leaned away from her and nodded glumly.

"I'm from Detroit,"the executive said. "I'm in systems management . . . mostly consultation work for engineering firms. What's your line?"

"I'm a judge . . . was a judge, I'm retired now," Steiner replied.

"A *judge*!" the skinny woman said, brightening. "Jeeze, we don't have *any* manners here at this table. I'm Joline, and my friend here is Sandy, and he's . . . *oops*—" she said, turning to the man from Detroit, "—I've forgotten your name."

"Frank," the man said, paying the waitress for the new round of drinks.

"I'll take care of that," Steiner said stiffly, automatically, but Frank wouldn't hear of it.

"You haven't told us *your* name," Joline said.

God, she has a chalkboard voice, Steiner thought. "Stephen," he mumbled.

"That's a very nice name," Joline said, warming to her role as Steiner's new companion. "It fits you, somehow."

Stephen felt trapped at his own table. He began to perspire. Joline primly sipped her drink—something white and frothy in a tall, frosted glass—through two short narrow cocktail straws. Steiner was of the opinion that sipping a drink through those straws, which were made for decoration, was like drinking coffee out of a cup without removing the spoon. Joline wriggled toward him. Every one of her movements seemed exaggerated. "I think you take life very seriously," she said, looking at him intently, as if she were working her way into something profound.

I've *got* to get out of here! Steiner thought. He looked at his watch, making it very apparent that he had other things to do. Frank and Sandy certainly didn't take any notice; they were kissing each other right there at the table like two high school kids on a bench at a roller-skating rink. I *can't* be seen with these people, Steiner told himself. Jesus Christ. . . . He glanced at Joline, who smiled and blushed a little and then firmly pressed her leg against his. She looked somehow limp, as if waiting to be embraced. Oh, Jesus . . . Steiner thought.

Frank whispered something to Sandy and then said to Steiner: "Steve, if you've no objections, we're going to take a little walk . . . we'll be right back. Give you two a chance to talk. Nice meeting you."

"See you soon, honey," Sandy said to Joline, smiling warmly as she stood up.

“We’ll hold down the fort,” Joline said shyly, her knee still wedged woodenly against Steiner’s.

“Would you care for another drink?” Steiner asked Joline after the others had left. He had to say something to her. Her silence was oppressive, and he was uncomfortable enough as it was.

“Yes . . . thank you.” Joline didn’t seem to be able to look at Steiner now that her friend had left, but she leaned against him until he said, “Excuse me,” and tried to disengage himself.

“You aren’t going to leave me here alone, are you?” Joline asked. There was a pleading in her voice, and suddenly Steiner felt sorry for her . . . she was lonely and ugly and past her prime. He felt both loathing and pity. “No . . . I’ll be right back,” he said as he stood up.

“Promise?” Joline asked coyly, trying to smile again without revealing her crooked teeth.

“I promise,” Steiner said. Jesus, Mary . . . he thought as he walked away. Is *that* the way Mariana saw *me* . . . the way I see that poor old girl at the table? Could I be *that* repulsive to her? He knew the answer . . . he was an old man wearing old man’s pastel clothes. He was an old man carrying a Jewish bankroll. No! he insisted. His skin might be like old clothes, but *he* wasn’t old. Suddenly he understood why his wife, Grace, may she rest in peace, had become obsessed with butterflies. She had *filled* her house with butterfly-shaped bric-a-brac before she died.

He walked to the far end of the bar, as if he were going to the men’s room, then ducked under the rope that separated deck from beach. Joline would be sitting back there alone, waiting. But I *can’t* go back, he thought. He shivered at the thought of kissing that mouth . . . feeling that long, protruding tooth with the tip of his tongue . . . smelling her odor.

He walked along the surf ’s edge, shoes squishing in the wet sand, and he became lost to the sound of waves pummeling the shell-strewn beach . . . lost to the waiting darkness ahead . . . lost below the clear sky filled with clusters of silent stars.

He passed a small hotel, which had one beach lamp on overhead, and standing upon the shadow line was the unicorn. It had been waiting for Steiner. It stood tall and gazed at him, only its great horned head clearly visible. The unicorn’s blue eyes seemed to glow, the same melting, beautiful color of the water in the Blue Grotto in Capri. Steiner stopped, and

suddenly remembered being in Europe as a young man, suddenly felt the selfsame awe of the world he had once felt. He also felt lost and empty. He grieved for himself and for the poor woman waiting for him at the Fontainebleau. What would she tell her friends when they returned? Would she, indeed, even wait for them?

Steiner gazed back at the unicorn, trying to make certain it was real and not just the play of shadows, or his imagination. It was *not* his imagination, he told himself. Staring into the unicorn's eyes seemed to stimulate memories he had forgotten for years:

He remembered swimming in the Mediterranean. He remembered a two-week vacation in Atlantic City with Grace and his two sons. He remembered riding bicycles on the boardwalk with his family. He remembered cooking eggs at four o'clock in the morning after a party and permitting the kids to come down and eat, too. He remembered his first trial . . . as a lawyer and as a judge. He remembered uneventful days with Grace . . . beautiful, precious, never-to-be-recovered days. He remembered coming home to problems with the boys and sharing dinnertime conversation across the table with Grace.

And he suddenly, desperately missed it all. He wanted the days back!

He also remembered the nameless women, and how Grace had begged him to come back. She had waited, but couldn't wait long enough. He wanted to go home . . . to Grace. He looked into the unicorn's sad eyes and saw himself, as if in a mirror. He was an empty old man who had lost his life to foolishness. He had wasted all of Grace's love . . . and now it was too late to make reparation.

Tears trembled and worked their way down his face, and the unicorn stepped toward him. It walked slowly, as if not to frighten him. Steiner stepped to the side, but did not try to run. The beast lay down beside him and rested its head in the sand, a gesture of submission. Steiner nervously extended his hand toward the unicorn's muzzle. The unicorn didn't flinch or move, and Steiner stroked its forehead. He touched its fluted black horn and saw that its tip looked red, as if dipped in blood.

He felt a contentment radiate through him as he stroked the unicorn. He also felt the throbbing return of the pain in his chest and arms, yet as the pain became greater, so did his sense of being removed from it. As he rested against the unicorn, he felt it quiver, then begin to move. It raised its head,

all the while watching Steiner, but before it stood up, Steiner pulled himself upon its back. I *can* ride the beast, Steiner thought as he held onto its coarse mane as the unicorn brought itself to full height.

"Come on, boy," Steiner whispered, feeling an almost forgotten heart-pounding joy. The unicorn sensed it, too, because it broke into a playful canter. It shook its head, as if miming laughter, and kicked its hind legs into the air. Steiner held the horse tightly with his legs. He felt his youthful strength returning. He felt at one with the unicorn. The unicorn jumped, galloped, and stopped short, only to sprint forward again. It ran full-out, edging closer to the sea, until it was splashing *in* the water. Steiner was shouting and laughing, unmindful of anything but the perfect joy of the moment. Steiner felt wonderful. For the first time in his life, everything was *right*. He felt he could do *anything*. He was at one with the world . . . and he rode and balanced on the back of the unicorn as if he had spent the past forty years of his life riding the wind.

Suddenly the unicorn turned and headed straight out into the ocean. Waves broke against its knees and chest. Steiner's legs were immersed in water. "What are you *doing*?" Steiner shouted joyfully, unafraid but holding on tightly to its neck. The unicorn walked deeper into the sea, past the breakers, until it was swimming smoothly and quickly through the warm, salty water. The sea was like a sheet of black glass, made of the same stuff as the unicorn's horn. It seemed to go on forever.

As the dark water rose over Steiner, he finally accepted the wreck of his life.

The unicorn lifted its great head as it descended into the sea. Steiner took hold of its red-tipped horn, and the unicorn carried him gently down into the ocean's cool, waiting depths.

Stalking the Unicorn with Gun and Camera

Mike Resnick

WHEN SHE GOT to within two hundred yards of the herd of Southern Savannah unicorns she had been tracking for four days, Rheela of the Seven Stars made her obeisance to Quatr Mane, God of the Hunt, then donned the Amulet of Kobassen, tested the breeze to make sure that she was still downwind of the herd, and began approaching them, camera in hand.

But Rheela of the Seven Stars had made one mistake—a mistake of *carelessness*—and thirty seconds later she was dead, brutally impaled upon the horn of a bull unicorn.

Hotack the Beastslayer cautiously made his way up the lower slopes of the Mountain of the Nameless One. He was a skilled tracker, a fearless hunter, and a crack shot. He picked out the trophy he wanted, got the beast within his sights, and hurled his killing club. It flew straight and true to its mark. And yet, less than a minute later, Hotack, his left leg badly gored, was barely able to pull himself to safety in the branches of a nearby Rainbow Tree. He, too, had made a mistake—a mistake of *ignorance*.

Bort the Pure had had a successful safari. He had taken three chimeras, a gorgon, and a beautifully matched pair of griffins. While his trolls were skinning the gorgon, he spotted a unicorn sporting a near-record horn, and, weapon in hand, he began pursuing it. The terrain gradually changed, and suddenly Bort found himself in shoulder-high kraken grass. Undaunted, he followed the trail into the dense vegetation.

But Bort the Pure, too, had made a mistake—a mistake *of foolishness*. His trolls found what very little remained of him some six hours later.

Carelessness, ignorance, foolishness—together they account for more deaths among unicorn hunters than all other factors combined.

Take our examples, for instance. All three hunters—Rheela, Hotack, and Bort—were experienced safari hands. They were used to extremes of temperature and terrain, they didn't object to finding insects in their ale or banshees in their tents, they knew they were going after deadly game and took all reasonable precautions before setting out.

And yet two of them died, and the third was badly maimed.

Let's examine their mistakes, and see what we can learn from them:

Rheela of the Seven Stars assimilated everything her personal wizard could tell her about unicorns, purchased the very finest photographic equipment, hired a native guide who had been on many unicorn hunts, and had a local witch doctor bless her Amulet of Kobassen. And yet, when the charge came, the amulet was of no use to her, for she had failed to properly identify the particular subspecies of unicorn before her—and, as I am continually pointing out during my lecture tours, the Amulet of Kobassen is potent only against the rare and almost-extinct Forest unicorn. Against the Southern Savannah unicorn, the *only* effective charm is the Talisman of Triconis. *Carelessness.*

Hotack the Beastslayer, on the other hand, disdained all forms of supernatural protection. To him, the essence of the hunt was to pit himself in physical combat against his chosen prey. His killing club, a beautifully wrought and finely balanced instrument of destruction, had brought down simurghs, humbabas, and even a dreaded wooly hydra. He elected to go for a head shot, and the club flew to within a millimeter of where he had aimed it. But he hadn't counted on the unicorn's phenomenal sense of smell, or the speed with which these surly brutes can move. Alerted to Hotack's presence, the unicorn turned its head to seek out its predator—and the killing club bounced harmlessly off its horn. Had Hotack spoken to almost any old-time unicorn hunter, he would have realized that head shots are almost impossible, and would have gone for a crippling knee shot. *Ignorance.*

Bort the Pure was aware of the unique advantages accruing to a virgin who hunts the wild unicorn, and so had practiced sexual abstinence since he was old enough to know what the term meant. And yet he naively believed that because his virginity allowed him to approach the unicorn more easily

than other hunters, the unicorn would somehow become placid and make no attempt to defend itself—and so he followed a vicious animal that was compelled to let him approach it, and entered a patch of high grass that allowed him no maneuvering room during the inevitable charge. *Foolishness.*

Every year hundreds of hopeful hunters go out in search of the unicorn, and every year all but a handful come back emptyhanded—if they come back at all. And yet the unicorn *can* be safely stalked and successfully hunted, if only the stalkers and hunters will take the time to study their quarry.

When all is said and done, the unicorn is a relatively docile beast (except when enraged). It is a creature of habit, and once those habits have been learned by the hopeful photographer or trophy hunter, bringing home that picture or that horn is really no more dangerous than, say, slaying an Eight-Forked Dragon—and it's certainly easier than lassoing wild minotaurs, a sport that has become all the rage these days among the smart set on the Platinum Range.

However, before you can photograph or kill a unicorn, you have to find it—and by far the easiest way to make contact with a unicorn herd is to follow the families of smerps that track the great game migrations. The smerps, of course, have no natural enemies except for the rafsheen and the zumakin, and consequently will allow a human (or preternatural) being to approach them quite closely.

A word of warning about the smerp: With its long ears and cute, fuzzy body, it resembles nothing more than an oversized rabbit—but calling a smerp a rabbit doesn't make it one, and you would be ill-advised to underestimate the strength of these nasty little scavengers. Although they generally hunt in packs of from ten to twenty, I have more than once seen a single smerp, its aura flowing with savage strength, pull down a half-grown unicorn. Smerps are poor eating, their pelts are worth less because of the difficulty of curing and tanning the auras, and they make pretty unimpressive trophies unless you can come up with one possessing a truly magnificent set of ears—in fact, in many areas they're still classified as vermin—but the wise unicorn hunter can save himself a lot of time and effort by simply letting the smerps lead him to his prey.

With the onset of poaching, the legendary unicorn herds numbering upwards of a thousand members no longer exist, and you'll find that the typical herd today consists of from fifty to seventy-five individuals. The days when a photographer, safe and secure in a blind by a water hole, could preserve on film an endless stream of the brutes coming down to drink are gone forever—and it is absolutely shocking to contemplate the number of unicorns that have died simply so their horns could be sold on the black market. In fact, I find it appalling that anyone in this enlightened day and age still believes that a powdered unicorn horn can act as an aphrodisiac.

(Indeed, as any magus can tell you, you treat the unicorn horn with essence of grach and then boil it slowly in a solution of sphinx blood. Now *that's* an aphrodisiac!)

But I digress.

The unicorn, being a nondiscriminating browser that is equally content to feed upon grasses, leaves, fruits, and an occasional small fern tree, occurs in a wide variety of habitats, often in the company of grazers such as centaurs and the pegasus.

Once you have spotted the unicorn herd, it must be approached with great care and caution. The unicorn may have poor eyesight, and its sense of hearing may not be much better, but it has an excellent sense of smell and an absolutely awesome sense of *grimscb* about which so much has been written that there is no point in my belaboring the subject yet again.

If you are on a camera safari, I would strongly advise against trying to get closer than one hundred yards to even a solitary beast—that sense of *grimscb*again—and most of the photographers I know swear by an 85-350mm automatic-focus zoom lens, providing, of course, that it has been blessed by a Warlock of the Third Order. If you haven't got the shots you want by sunset, my best advice is to pack it in for the day and return the next morning. Flash photography is possible, of course, but it does tend to attract golem and other even more bothersome nocturnal predators.

One final note to the camera buff: For reasons our alchemists have not yet determined, no unicorn has ever been photographed with normal emulsified film of any speed, so make absolutely sure that you use one of the more popular infrared brands. It would be a shame to spend weeks on safari, paying for your guide, cook, and trolls, only to come away with a

series of photos of the forest that you thought was merely the background to your pictures.

As for hunting the brutes, the main thing to remember is that they are as close to you as you are to them. For this reason, while I don't disdain blood sacrifices, amulets, talismans, and blessings, all of which have their proper place, I for one always feel more confident with a .550 Nitro Express in my hands. A little extra stopping power can give a hunter quite a feeling of security.

You'll want a bull unicorn, of course; they tend to have more spectacular horns than cows—and by the time a bull's horn is long enough to be worth taking, he's probably too old to be in the herd's breeding program anyway.

The head shot, for reasons explained earlier, is never a wise option. And unless your wizard teaches you the Rune of Mamhotet, thus enabling you to approach close enough to pour salt on the beast's tail and thereby pin him to the spot where he's standing, I recommend the heart shot (either heart will do—and if you have a double-barreled gun, you might try to hit both of them, just to be on the safe side).

If you have the bad fortune to merely wound the beast, he'll immediately make off for the trees or the high grass, which puts you at an enormous disadvantage. Some hunters, faced with such a situation, merely stand back and allow the smerps to finish the job for them—after all, smerps rarely devour the horn unless they're completely famished—but this is hardly sporting. The decent, honorable hunter, well aware of the unwritten rules of blood sports, will go after the unicorn himself.

The trick, of course, is to meet him on fairly open terrain. Once the unicorn lowers his head to charge, he's virtually blind, and all you need do is dance nimbly out of his way and take another shot at him—or, if you are not in possession of the Rune of Mamhotet, this would be an ideal time to get out that salt and try to sprinkle some on his tail as he races by.

When the unicorn dictates the rules of the game, you've got a much more serious situation. He'll usually double back and lie in the tall grasses beside his spoor, waiting for you to pass by, and then attempt to gore you from behind.

It is at this time that the hunter must have all his wits about him. Probably the best sign to look for is the presence of Fire-Breathing Dragonflies. These noxious little insects frequently live in symbiosis with the unicorn,

cleansing his ears of parasites, and their presence usually means that the unicorn isn't far off. Yet another sign that your prey is nearby will be the flocks of hungry harpies circling overhead, waiting to swoop down and feed upon the remains of your kill; and, of course, the surest sign of all is when you hear a grunt of rage and find yourself staring into the bloodshot, beady little eyes of a wounded bull unicorn from a distance of ten feet or less. It's moments like that that make you feel truly alive, especially when you suddenly realize that this isn't necessarily a permanent condition.

All right. Let us assume that your hunt is successful. What then?

Well, your trolls will skin the beast, of course, and take special care in removing and preserving the horn. If they've been properly trained, they'll also turn the pelt into a rug, the hooves into ashtrays, the teeth into a necklace, the tail into a flyswatter, and the scrotum into a tobacco pouch. My own feeling is that you should settle for nothing less, since it goes a long way toward showing the bleeding-heart preservationists that a unicorn can supply the hunter with a lot more than just a few minutes of pleasurable sport and a horn. And while I'm on the subject of what the unicorn can supply, let me strongly suggest that you would be missing a truly memorable experience if you were to come home from safari without having eaten unicorn meat at least once. There's nothing quite like unicorn cooked over an open camp-fire to top off a successful hunt. (And do remember to leave something out for the smerps, or they might well decide that hunter is every bit as tasty as unicorn.)

So get out those amulets and talismans, visit those wizards and warlocks, pack those cameras and weapons—and good hunting to you!

Next Week: Outstaring the Medusa

—The End—

Sportsman’s Difficulty

Doris Pitkin Buck

To every man, his favorite hunting;
My game, the unicorn.
Never a thunder like his trumpet throat.
Never such lightning
as flames, all gold or lilac, from that eye.
I do not know how he can toss so proudly
his horse’s head weighted with that vast horn.
He is the king
of all that tread on hooves;
his own are windshod,
and if you think wind is not hard like iron,
go lean against it in a city canyon.

I could have caught a herd of unicorns
were the bait easier
to find.

The Lady’s Garden

Jane Yolen

IN THE LADY’S garden lived three unicorns. They were all old—Lady, garden, and unicorns—having been there from the beginning of things.

The garden was kept from the sight of the World by a very large stone wall which was overgrown with spindly weeds and thistles, and hairy moss plugging up the chinks.

When the sun shone down, the unicorns liked to lie under the apple tree, which was the oldest thing of all in the garden. Its branches hung down to the ground, gnarled and misshapen, but covered with the most delicious red apples the year round.

When it rained, which was an hour every other day and twice on Tuesdays, regular as clockwork, the unicorns would stay in the stone barn, snugged together in the sweet-smelling hay. The patter on the barn roof then took on a soporific rhythm, and often the unicorns would doze and dream. Their dreams were always about running over great green swards, the wind through the white manes. Always.

If the Lady dreamed—or even she napped—no one knew for sure, for she only spoke of waking things: tide and sun and wind and rain and the changing of seasons.

On one side of the garden was, as I have said, the World. On the other was the Great Ocean. It was the Ocean’s tide which was often the subject of the Lady’s discourse. And though she may have thought any trouble to the garden would come to it from the World’s side, it was the Ocean that did, in the end, bring about her direst time.

Now, though the unicorns were all terribly old, they were not the same age. The oldest was Wishart, whose skin was almost translucent; it was a kind of pearly white, like the inside of certain shells. When he walked—and he never ran—he moved with an ancient grace. His breath smelled musty,

like a bowl of crushed flower petals. He rarely listened to anything but the sound of the Ocean outside the wall.

The second oldest was Tartary. Her skin was like vellum and looked brittle but wasn't. In fact it was as soft as an infant's and smelled that sweet-sour infant smell, as if talc and sour milk had been mixed together. Tartary listened only to the Lady's voice.

The third oldest—they called her Infanta when they called her anything at all—still had a bit of spirit to her walk, and a bit of flint in her amber eyes. Even her horn was still the gold of new-minted coins, while the other unicorns had horns more like the color of the full moon.

If Wishart listened only to the sound of the Ocean, and Tartary listened only to the Lady, Infanta heard the sounds of the earth growing: grass and leaves and timothy in the fields. She could distinguish between oak and ash on the rise, though the sound of rowan growing made her tremble all over.

And the Lady? She was old but she never seemed to age. Except her eyes, which were once the deep, rich blue of a Spring sky and were now faded like the skies over Winter.

Now the way that trouble came to the garden was this. It was a small thing, but the Lady should have known that small things carry the greatest dangers. Didn't a tiny viper bite the heel of the hero and bring him low? Didn't ants tunnel through the great walls of Cathay and grind whole sections to dust?

For the first time in years—in centuries, actually—there was a strange sound outside one of the gates in the wall. Those gates, normally so overgrown with bramble hedge and briar on the World's side and so besieged by the Ocean on the other, needed no guards or wards. In fact, the Lady and the unicorns scarcely remembered from one year to the next that the gates existed. But this one lambent spring day, right after the hour's rain, there was something rather like the wailing of a discontented child by the Northeastern gate. No, *exactly* like the wailing of a discontented child. The wailing went on from the moment the rain ended until quite past teatime, or about three hours. At that point, Infanta stomped three times with her left forefoot and shook her head until the white mane flew about as light as milkweed milk.

"What *is* that noise?" she asked.

Neither Tartary—who listened to the Lady—or Wishart—who listened only to the sea—bothered to answer. But Infanta asked anyway. "It is louder than grass growing. Louder than a gully full of Queen Anne's lace and campion. Louder even than the bursting open of marigolds, which is very loud, indeed." And she went to complain directly to the Lady, who had heard the sound already.

"If I didn't know any better," said the Lady, "I would say it is a child—and a very young child at that—lying in a reed basket washed up upon the Ocean's small shingle." And because the Lady was blessed with a certain amount of prescience, which is another way of saying she could see a bit into the future, Infanta knew exactly what they would find.

The Lady sent one of her most trusted winds to leap over the wall and report back. It was a very small wind, hardly more than a breeze, really. When it returned, it reported in a voice made sweet with baby's breath and tart with brine. "It is a very young child lying in a basket."

"A reed basket," the Lady said, a great deal of satisfaction in her voice.

"Well, nettles and linen, actually," the breeze answered. Breezes, for all they are lightweight, insist on being factual. It is the habit of preachers and politicians as well.

The Lady made a face at the breeze. She hated making any kind of mistake. But then she smiled at the breeze because it had, after all, merely been reporting, not making judgments. And then the Lady instructed slightly larger breezes to waft their gauzy shifts together and make a rope to hook through the handles of the basket. In this way the child was raised up and over the wall and into the garden proper.

And that, you see, was the Beginning of the End.

The child was a boy. That was evident at once. And he was hungry. That, too, was evident. But whose child he was or why he was there at all, those questions could not be answered, not even by the Lady. Indeed those questions were *never* to be answered, but by teatime the next day it didn't matter because by then they were all thoroughly besotted with him.

Infanta was the first to fall under his spell, when he raised his little hand up to her mane and tangled his chubby fingers in it.

The next to fall was Tartary. “He has,” she cooed to the Lady, “your voice.” By which she meant she was listening to him, though not really hearing him, for certainly the baby did not have the Lady’s voice at all, hers being low and rounded and full, and his just being full.

Wishart actually held out the longest, until the breezes lifted the child onto his back. The baby crowed his delight, and if you could at that moment have seen the look in Wishart’s old pearly eyes, you would have been sure they had turned to oceans themselves. He trotted around the inner path, past the herb gardens, stepping over rockery plants with a lightness he hadn’t shown in years.

The Lady changed the baby’s clothes and fed him pap she mixed herself, and wiped both his face and his bottom as if that were something she had always wanted to do. And she sang to him as she cleaned, songs like “Dance to Thy Daddy, My Little Laddie,” and “Trot, Trot to Boston,” which hadn’t even been invented yet. And “Western Wind,” which had.

Eventually, after months of squabbling, they settled on Waverly as his name.

“Because the waves brought him,” the Infanta said, looking down fondly into his crib.

As long as Waverly was a baby and then a child, there was no trouble in the Lady’s garden. After all, except for uprooting some of the slighter plants—to see what held them to the ground—Waverly was a good boy, if overly curious. Of course curiosity was not something either the Lady or the unicorns really understood. But they realized, if somewhat begrudgingly, that curiosity would serve young Waverly in his education, and so they did not stifle it.

By the time he was ten and had gone through “What’s that?” and “Why’s that?” and on to “Why not?” however, they had all begun to lose patience with him. With their sense of time, it seemed that only yesterday they had drawn baby Waverly up from the basket, though to Waverly it was ages and ages earlier.

Where, they wondered, *is the sweet-smelling, charming, compliant infant we fell in love with! And who is this loud, boisterous, dirty boy who has*

taken his place! And slowly, though they certainly didn't mean to, they all fell out of love with him. Just a little.

Just enough.

Now Waverly did not know what was happening, but he certainly felt that something was. One moment everyone—Lady and unicorns and breezes—had all been lovely to him, giving him whatever he asked for and praising him. And then suddenly they said "No!" all the time. "No, you cannot make a fortress in the rockery garden." "No, you cannot put a house up in the apple tree." "No, you cannot scale the wall." "No, you cannot . . . must not . . . shall not . . . may not . . ." to everything that seemed even the slightest bit interesting or exciting or dangerous.

So Waverly did what every child at ten does. He did it all anyway.

Neither the Lady nor the unicorns knew the slightest thing about giving out punishments. It was not in their makeup. So they did what they had done before Waverly had ever arrived. Wishart started listening only to the sound of the sea. Tartary listened only to the Lady's voice. Infanta listened only to the sounds of the earth growing. And the Lady—she worked in the garden, she kept the great house clean, and she spoke to Waverly only when forced to. When forced to say, once again, "No!"

So it should not have been surprising—though it was—that on the morning of Waverly's sixteenth birthday (or at least the morning of the anniversary of the sixteenth year he had been drawn up out of the sea) they were all awakened by the sound of loud chopping. When they got out to the garden, there was Waverly, an axe in hand. He had just finished cutting down the apple tree and hollowing it into a boat.

"A boat ?" the Lady asked for she knew right away what he was doing, her prescience working as well as her eyes. "And where did you learn about boats?"

"Where I learned about the Ocean and where I learned about the World," Waverly answered sensibly. "In your library."

"But the apple tree is the oldest thing of all," the Lady said.

"And I am the newest," Waverly said. "Would you have had me make a boat from stone?"

“We wouldn’t have you make a boat at all,” the Lady said. “Would we?” she asked the unicorns.

Wishart did not answer, for he was listening only to the sea which was issuing a strange siren call. Tartary did not answer, for she was waiting for the Lady’s answer. And Infanta was too busy weeping over the demise of the apple tree.

Still, they didn’t stop the boy, because he was already halfway through building the boat. And besides, they didn’t know how.

It took him three days to make the boat and rig a sail, just as he had seen in one of the books in the Lady’s library. And that very night, without so much as a goodbye, he was gone with the boat over the wall. They had no idea how he had managed; they’d had no idea he was so resourceful.

The Lady mourned his leaving in her own way, digging up plants and moving them about, the autumn crocuses three times, until they died from all the changes.

Tartary and Infanta wandered disconsolately about, their heads so low they plowed furrows in the soil with their horns. But for the longest time, it looked as if Wishart hadn’t even noticed the boy was gone. He just listened, ever more intently, at the Northeastern gate to the sounds of the sea.

And then one morning, a gale blowing out upon the Ocean, Wishart roused in a sudden and inexplicable fury and beat upon the gate with his feet and plunged his horn again and again into the wood. At last the gate broke open from the savage attack, swung wide, and in rushed the angry sea.

The waters covered the garden and the house. The Lady and the unicorns were swept away in a great swirl of foam as pearly white as horn. And after the waters settled again, all that could be seen was the topmost part of the Southwestern gate, the one closest to the World. And there, at low tide ever after, a black-backed gull sat, turning its head curiously at each passing breeze.

Of course that is not entirely the end of the story. I could not bear if that were so. Wishart and Tartary and Infanta became the very first narwhales,

of course, those wonderful sleek whales with the long, twisting single horns.

The Lady built a new garden, this one under the Ocean, with bright anemones clinging to coral beds, like rockeries.

And Waverly, in the shape of a porpoise, comes to visit them every day and twice on Tuesdays, as regular as clockwork. Or so I like to think. And since this is my story, that is the way of it. If you think there is a different ending, you will have to tell it yourself.

Mythological Beast

Stephen R. Donaldson

NORMAN WAS A perfectly safe, perfectly sane man. He lived with his wife and son, who were both perfectly safe, perfectly sane, in a world that was perfectly sane, perfectly safe. It had been that way all his life. So when he woke up that morning, he felt as perfect as always. He had no inkling at all of the things that had already started to happen to him.

As usual, he woke up when he heard the signal from the biomitter cybernetically attached to his wrist; and, as usual, the first thing he did was to press the stud which activated the biomitter's LED readout. The display gleamed greenly for a moment on the small screen. As usual, it said, *You are OK.* There was nothing to be afraid of.

As usual, he had absolutely no idea what he would have done if it had said anything else.

His wife, Sally, was already up. Her signal came before his so that she would have time to use the bathroom and get breakfast started. That way, there would be no unpleasant hurrying. He rolled out of bed promptly and went to take his turn in the bathroom so that he would not be late for work and his son, Enwell, would not be late for school.

Everything in the bathroom was the same as usual. Even though Sally had just used it, the vacuum-sink was spotless. And the toilet was as clean as new. He could not even detect his wife's warmth on the seat. Everything was perfectly safe, perfectly sane. His reflection in the mirror was the only thing that had changed.

The tight lump in the center of his forehead made no sense to him. He had never seen it before. Automatically, he checked his biomitter, but again it said, *You are OK.* That seemed true enough. He did not feel ill—and he was almost the only person he knew who knew what "ill" meant. The lump did not hurt in any way. But still he felt vaguely uneasy. He trusted the biomitter. It should have been able to tell him what was happening.

Carefully, he explored the lump. It was as hard as bone. In fact, it seemed to be part of his skull. It looked familiar; and he scanned back in his memory through some of the books he had read until he found what he wanted. His lump looked like the base of a horn or perhaps the nub of a new antler. He had seen such things in books.

That made even less sense. His face wore an unusual frown as he finished in the bathroom. He returned to the bedroom to get dressed and then went to the kitchen for breakfast.

Sally was just putting his food on the table—the same juice, cereal, and soyham that she always served him—a perfectly safe meal that would give him energy for the morning without letting him gain weight or become ill. He sat down to eat it as he always did. But when Sally sat down opposite him, he looked at her and said, "What's this thing on my forehead?"

His wife had a round, bland face, and its lines had slowly become blurred over the years. She looked at his lump vaguely, but there was no recognition in her eyes. "Are you OK?" she said.

He touched the stud of his biomitter and showed her that he was OK.

Automatically, she checked her own biomitter and got the same answer. Then she looked at him again. This time, she, too, frowned. "It shouldn't be there," she said.

Enwell came into the kitchen, and Sally went to get his breakfast. Enwell was a growing boy. He watched the food come as if he were hungry, and then he began to eat quickly. He was eating too quickly. But Norman did not need to say anything. Enwell's biomitter gave a low hum and displayed in kind yellow letters: *Eat more slowly.* Enwell obeyed with a shrug.

Norman smiled at his son's obedience, then frowned again. He trusted his biomitter. It should be able to explain the lump on his forehead. Using the proper code, he tapped on the face of the display, */ need a doctor.* A doctor would know what was happening to him.

His biomitter replied, *You are OK.*

This did not surprise him. It was standard procedure—the biomitter was only doing its job by reassuring him. He tapped again, / *need a doctor.* This time, the green letters said promptly, *Excused from work. Go to Medical Building room 218.*

Enwell's biomitter signaled that it was time for him to go to school. "Got to go," he mumbled as he left the table. If he saw the lump on his father's

forehead, he did not think enough about it to say anything. Soon he had left the house. As usual, he was on time.

Norman rubbed his lump. The hard bone nub made him feel uneasy again. He resisted an urge to recheck his biomitter. When he had finished his breakfast, he said good-bye to Sally, as he always did when he was going to work. Then he went out to the garage and got into his mobile.

After he had strapped himself in, he punched the address of the Medical Building into the console. He knew where the Medical Building was, not because he had ever been there before (in fact, no one he knew had ever been there), but because it was within sight of the National Library, where he worked. Once the address was locked in, his mobile left the garage smoothly on its balloon tires (a perfectly safe design), and slid easily into the perfectly sane flow of the traffic.

All the houses on this street were identical for a long way in either direction, and as usual Norman paid no attention to them. He did not need to watch the traffic, since his mobile took care of things like that. His seat was perfectly comfortable. He just relaxed in his safety straps and tried not to feel concerned about his lump until his mobile deposited him on the curb outside the Medical Building.

This building was much taller and longer than the National Library; but, apart from that, the two were very much alike. Both were empty except for the people who worked there; and the people worked there because they needed jobs, not because there was any work that needed to be done. And both were similarly laid out inside. Norman had no trouble finding his way to room 218.

Room 218 was in the Iatrogenics Wing. In the outer office was a desk with a computer terminal very much like the one Norman used at the library, and at the desk sat a young woman with yellow hair and confused eyes. When Norman entered her office, she stared at him as if he were sick. Her stare made him touch his lump and frown. But she was not staring at his forehead. After a moment, she said, “It’s been so long—I’ve forgotten what to do.”

“Maybe I should tell you my name,” he said.

“That sounds right,” she said. She sounded relieved. “Yes, I think that’s right. Tell me your name.”

He told her. She looked around the terminal, then pushed a button to engage some kind of program. “Now what?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. She did not seem to like being so confused.

Norman did not know, either. But almost at once the door to the inner office opened. The woman shrugged, so Norman just walked through the doorway.

The inner office had been designed to be cozy, but something had gone wrong with its atmospherics, and now it was deep in dust. When Norman sat down in the only chair, he raised the dust, and the dust made him cough.

“I’m Dr. Brett,” a voice said. “You seem to have a cough.”

The voice came from a console that faced the chair. Apparently, Dr. Brett was a computer who looked just like the director of the National Library. Norman relaxed automatically. He naturally trusted a computer like that. “No,” he said. “It’s the dust.”

“Ah, the dust,” the computer said. “I’ll make a note to have it removed.” His voice sounded wise and old and very rusty. After a moment, he went on. “There must be something wrong with my scanners. You look healthy to me.”

Norman said, “My biomitter says I’m OK.”

“Well, then my scanners must be right. You’re in perfect health. Why did you come?”

“I have a lump on my forehead.”

“A lump?” Dr. Brett hummed. “It looks healthy to me. Are you sure it isn’t natural?”

“Yes.” For an instant, Norman felt unnaturally irritated. He touched the lump with his fingers. It was as hard as bone—no, harder, as hard as steel, magnasite. It was as hard as tung-diamonds. He began to wonder why he had bothered to come here.

“Of course, of course,” the doctor said. “I’ve checked your records. You weren’t born with it. What do you think it is?”

The question surprised Norman. “How should I know? I thought you would tell me.”

“Of course,” said the computer. “You can trust me. I’ll tell you everything that’s good for you. That’s what I’m here for. You know that. The director of the National Library speaks very highly of you. It’s in your records.”

The machine's voice made Norman's irritation evaporate. He trusted his biomitter. He trusted Dr. Brett. He settled himself in the chair to hear what his lump was. But even that amount of movement raised the dust. He sneezed twice.

Dr. Brett said, "You seem to have a cold."

"No," Norman said. "It's the dust."

"Ah, the dust," Dr. Brett said. "Thank you for coming."

'"Thank you for—'?" Norman was surprised. All at once, he felt very uneasy. He felt that he had to be careful. "Aren't you going to tell me what it is?"

"There's nothing to worry about," the doctor said. "You're perfectly healthy. It will go away in a couple of days. Thank you for coming."

The door was open. Norman stared at the computer. The director did not act like this. He was confused. But he did not ask any more questions. Instead, he was careful. He said, "Thank you, Doctor," and walked out of the office. The door closed behind him.

The woman was still sitting at the outer desk. When she saw Norman, she beckoned to him. "Maybe you can help me," she said.

"Yes?" he said.

"I remember what I'm supposed to do now," she said. "After you see the doctor, I'm supposed to get his instructions"—she tapped the console—"and make sure you understand them. But nobody's ever come here before. And when I got this job, I didn't tell them"—she looked away from Norman—"that I don't know how to read."

Norman knew what she meant. Of course, she could read her biomitter—everybody could do that. But except for that, reading was not taught anymore. Enwell certainly was not learning how to read in school. Reading was not needed anymore. Except for the people at the National Library, Norman was the only person he knew who could actually read. That was why no one ever came to use the library.

But now he was being careful. He smiled to reassure the woman and walked around the desk to look at her console. She tapped the display to activate the readout.

At once, vivid red letters sprang across the screen. They said:

SECRET CONFIDENTIAL PRIVATE PERSONAL SECRETcy UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES REPEAT UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES SHOW THIS DIAGNOSIS TO PATIENT OR REVEAL ITS CONTENTScyclecycle

Then there was a series of numbers that Norman did not understand. Then the letters said:

ABSOLUTE PRIORITY TRANSMIT AT ONCE TO GENERAL HOSPITAL EMERGENCY DIVISION REPEAT EMERGENCYc DIVISION ABSOLUTE PRIORITY cyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy

"Transmit," the woman said. "That means I'm supposed to send this to the hospital." Her hand moved toward the buttons that would send the message.

Norman caught her wrist. "No," he said. "That isn't what it means. It means something else."

The woman said, "Oh."

The bright red letters said:

DIAGNOSIS cyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy PATIENT SUFFERING FROM MASSIVE GENETIC BREAKDOWN OF INTERMEDIATE ORIGIN COMPLETE REPEAT COMPLETE STRUCTURAL TRANSITION IN PROGRESS TRANSMUTATION IRREVERSIBLE cyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclec PROGNOSIScyclecyclecyclecyclecy PATIENT WILL BECOME DANGEROUS HIMSELF AND WILL CAUSE FEAR IN OTHERS REPEAT WILL CAUSE FEAR TREATMENTcyclecyclecyclecyclec STUDY RECOMMENDED BUT DESTRUCTION IMPERATIVE REPEAT IMPERATIVE REPEAT IMPERATIVE EFFECT SOONESTcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyelecy

"What did it say?" the woman said.

For a moment, Norman did not answer. His lump was as hard as a magnasite nail driven into his skull. Then he said, "It said I should get some rest. It said I've been working too hard. It said I should go to the hospital if I don't feel better tomorrow." Before the woman could stop him, he pressed the buttons that erased the terminal's memory. The terminal was just like the one he used in the National Library, and he knew what to do. After erasing, he programmed the terminal to cancel everything that had happened today. Then he fed in a cancel program to wipe out everything in the terminal. He did not know what good that would do, but he did it anyway.

He expected the woman to try to stop him, but she did not. She had no idea of what he was doing. He was sweating, and his pulse was too fast. He was so uneasy that his stomach hurt. That had never happened to him before. He left the office without saying anything to the woman. His knees were trembling. As he walked down the corridor of the Iatrogenics Wing, his biomitter was saying in blue reassuring letters, *You will be OK. You will be OK.*

Apparently, his erasures were successful. In the next few days, nothing happened to him as a result of Dr. Brett's report. By the time he had returned home from the Medical Building, his readout had regained its placid green, *You are OK.*

He had done this deliberately. He did not feel OK. He felt uneasy. But he did not want his biomitter to send him to the General Hospital. So while his mobile drove him home, he had made an effort to seem OK. The touch of his lump gave him a strange reassurance, and after a while his pulse, blood pressure, respiration, reflexes had become as steady as usual.

And at home everything seemed perfectly sane, perfectly safe. He woke up every morning at the signal of his biomitter, went to work at the signal of his biomitter, ate lunch at the signal of his biomitter. This was reassuring. It reassured him that his biomitter took such good care of him. Without it, he might have worked all day without lunch, reading, sorting the mountain of discarded books in the storeroom, feeding them into the reference computer. At times like that, his uneasiness went away. He went home again at the end of the day at the signal of his biomitter.

But at home his uneasiness returned. Something was happening inside him. Every morning, he saw in the mirror that his lump was growing. It was clearly a horn now—a pointed shaft as white as bone. It was full of strength. When it was more than four inches long, he tested it on the mirror. The mirror was made of glasteel so that it would never shatter and hurt anybody. But he scratched it easily with the tip of his horn. Scratching it took no effort at all.

And that was not the only change. The soles of his feet were growing harder. His feet seemed to be getting shorter. They were starting to look like hooves.

Tufts of pure white hair as clean as the sky were sprouting from the backs of his calves and the back of his neck. Something that might have been a tail grew out of the small of his back.

But these things were not what made him uneasy. And he was not uneasy because he was thinking that someone from the hospital might come to destroy him. He was not thinking that at all. He was being careful: he did not let himself think anything that might make his biomitter call for help. No, he was uneasy because he could not understand what Sally and Enwell were doing about what was happening to him.

They were not doing anything. They were ignoring the changes in him as if he looked just the same as always.

Everything was perfectly sane, perfectly safe, to them.

First this made him uneasy. Then it made him angry. Something important was happening to him, and they did not even see it. Finally at breakfast one morning he became too irritated to be careful. Enwell's biomitter signaled that it was time for him to go to school. He mumbled, "Got to go," and left the table. Soon he had left the house. Norman watched his son go. Then he said to Sally, "Who taught him to do that?"

She did not look up from her soyham. "Do what?" she said.

"Go to school," he said. "Obey his biomitter. We never taught him to do that."

Sally's mouth was full. She waited until she swallowed. Then she said, "Everybody does it."

The way she said it made his muscles tighten. A line of sweat ran down his back. For an instant, he wanted to hit the table with his hand—hit it with the hard flat place on the palm of his hand. He felt sure he could break the table.

Then his biomitter signaled to him. Automatically, he left the table. He knew what to do. He always knew what to do when his biomitter signaled. He went out to the garage and got into his mobile. He strapped himself into the seat. He did not notice what he was doing until he saw that his hands had punched in the address of the General Hospital.

At once, he canceled the address, unstrapped himself, and got out of the mobile. His heart was beating too fast. His biomitter was saying without being asked, *Go to the Hospital. You will be OK.* The letters were yellow.

His hands trembled. But he tapped onto the display, / *am OK*. Then he went back into the house.

Sally was cleaning the kitchen, as she always did after breakfast. She did not look at him.

"Sally," he said. "I want to talk to you. Something's happening to me."

"It's time to clean the kitchen," she said. "I heard the signal."

"Clean the kitchen later," he said. "I want to talk to you. Something's happening to me."

"I heard the signal," she said. "It's time to clean the kitchen now."

"Look at me," he said.

She did not look at him. Her hands were busy wiping scraps of soyham into the vacuum-sink, where they were sucked away.

"Look at me," he said. He took hold of her shoulders with his hands and made her face him. It was easy. He was strong. "Look at my forehead."

She did not look at him. Her face screwed up into tight knots and ridges. It turned red. Then she began to cry. She wailed and wailed, and her legs did not hold her up. When he let her go, she sank to the floor and folded up into a ball and wailed. Her biomitter said to her in blue, *You will be OK. You will be OK.* But she did not see it. She cried as if she were terrified.

Norman felt sick in his stomach. But his carefulness had come back. He left his wife and went back to the garage. He got into his mobile and punched in an address only ten houses away down the road. His mobile left the garage smoothly and eased itself into the perfectly sane flow of the traffic. When it parked at the address he had given it, he did not get out. He sat in his seat and watched his house.

Before long, an ambulance rolled up to his house. Men in white coats went in. They came out carrying Sally on a stretcher. They loaded her carefully into the ambulance and drove away.

Because he did not know what else to do, he punched the address of the National Library into the console of his mobile and went to work. The careful part of him knew that he did not have much time. He knew (everyone knew) that his biomitter was his friend. But now he also knew that it would not be long before his biomitter betrayed him. The rebellion in his genes was becoming too strong. It could not stay secret much longer. And he still did not know what was happening to him. He wanted to use the time to find out, if he could. The library was the best place for him to go.

But when he reached his desk with its computer console like the one in Dr. Brett's outer office, he did not know what to do. He had never done any research before. He did not know anyone who had ever done any research. His job was to sort books, to feed them into the reference computer. He did not even know what he was looking for.

Then he had an idea. He keyed his terminal into the reference computer and programmed it for autoscan. Then he tapped in his question, using the "personal information" code which was supposed to keep his question and answer from tying up the general circuits of the library and bothering the director. He asked:

/ have hooves, a tail, white hair, and a horn in the middle of my forehead. What am I?

After a short pause, the display ran numbers which told Norman his answer was coming from the 1976 *Encyclopedia Americana*. That encyclopedia was a century out of date, but it was the most recent one in the library. Apparently, people had not bothered to make encyclopedias for a long time.

Then the display said:

ANSWERcycleUNICORNcyclecyclDATAFOLLOWScyclecyclecyclecyclecy

His uneasiness became suddenly sharper. There was a sour taste in his mouth as he scanned the readout.

THE UNICORN IS A MYTHOLOGICAL BEAST USUALLY DEPICTED AS A LARGE HORSE WITH A SINGLE HORN ON ITS FOREHEADcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyc

Sweat ran into his eyes. He missed a few lines while he blinked to clear his sight.

IT REPRESENTED CHASTITY AND PURITY THOUGH IT WOULD FIGHT SAVAGELY WHEN CORNERED IT COULD BE TAMED BY A VIRGIN'S TOUCH IN SOME INTERPRETATIONS THE UNICORN IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE VIRGIN MARY IN OTHERS IT REPRESENTS CHRIST THE REDEEMERcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecycl

Then, to his surprise, the display showed him a picture of a unicorn. It was prancing high on its strong clean legs, and its coat was pure as the stars, and its eyes shone. Its mane flew like the wind. Its long white horn was as strong as the sun. At the sight, all his uneasiness turned into joy. The unicorn was beautiful. It was beautiful. He was going to be beautiful. For a

long time, he made the display hold that picture, and he stared at it and stared at it.

But after his joy receded a little and the display went blank, he began to think. He felt that he was thinking for the first time in his life. His thoughts were clear and necessary and quick.

He understood that he was in danger. He was in danger from his biomitter. It was a hazard to him. It was only a small thing, a meta-sensor that monitored his body for signs of illness; but it was linked to the huge computers of the General Hospital; and when his metabolism passed beyond the parameters of safety, sanity, his biomitter would summon the men in white coats. For the first time in his life, he felt curious about it. He felt that he needed to know more about it.

Without hesitation, he tapped his question into the reference computer, using his personal information code. He asked:

/ Origin of biomitter?

The display ran numbers promptly and began a readout.

WORLDWIDE VIOLENCE CRIME WAR INSANITY OF 20TH CENTURY SHOWED HUMANS CAPABLE OF SELFEXTERMINATION OPERATIVE CAUSE WAS FEAR REPEAT FEAR RESEARCH DEMONSTRATED HUMANS WITHOUT FEAR NONVIOLENT SANEcyclec POLICE EDUCATION PEACE TREATIES INADEQUATE TO CONTROL FEAR OF INDIVIDUAL HUMANS BUT SANE INDIVIDUAL HUMANS NOT PRONE TO VIOLENCE WAR TREATIES POLICE WEAPONS UNNECESSARY IF INDIVIDUALS NOT AFRAIDcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy TREATMENTcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclec BIOMITTER MEDICOMPUTER NETWORK INITIATED FORc ALL INDIVIDUALS MONITOR PHYSIOLOGICAL SIGNS OF EMOTION STRESS ILLNESS CONDITIONED RESPONSES INBRED TO CONTROL BEHAVIOR FEAR***CROSSREFERENCE PAVLOV BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION SUBCONSCIOUS HYPNOTISMcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy SUCCESS OF BIOMITTER PROGRAM DEMONSTRATES FEAR DOES NOT EXIST WHERE CONTROL ORDER

Abruptly, the green letters flashed off the display, and the terminal began to readout a line of

red.

DATA CANCEL REPEAT CANCELcyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecyclecy MATERIAL CLASSIFICATION RESTRICTED NOT AVAILABLE WITHOUT APPROVAL DIRECTOR

NATIONAL LIBRARY FILE APPROVAL CODE BEFORE REACTIVATING REFERENCE PROGRAMcyclecyclecyclecyclecycl

Norman frowned around his horn. He was not sure what had happened. Perhaps he had accidentally stumbled upon information that was always restricted and had automatically triggered the reference computer's cancellation program. Or perhaps the director had just now succeeded in breaking his personal information code and had found out what he was doing. If the interruption had been automatic, he was still safe. But if the director had been monitoring him personally, he did not have much time. He needed to know.

He left his desk and went to the director's office. The director looked very much like Dr. Brett. Norman believed that he could break the director with one kick of his hard foot. He knew what to do. He said, "Director."

"Yes, Norman?" the director said. His voice was warm and wise, like Dr. Brett's. Norman did not trust him. "Are you OK? Do you want to go home?"

"I am OK," Norman said. "I want to take out some books."

"'Take out some books'?" the director said. "What do you mean?"

"I want to withdraw some books. I want to take them home with me."

"Very well," the director said. "Take them with you. Take the rest of the day off. You need some rest."

"Thank you," Norman said. He was being careful. Now he had what he wanted. He knew that the director had been watching him. He knew that the director had deliberately broken his personal information code. He knew that the director had transmitted his information to the General Hospital and had been told that he, Norman, was dangerous. No one was allowed to take books out of the National Library. It was forbidden to withdraw books. Always. Even the director could not override that rule, unless he had been given emergency programming.

Norman was no longer safe. But he did not hurry. He did not want the General Hospital to think that he was afraid. The men in white coats would chase him more quickly if they thought he was afraid of them. He walked calmly, as if he were perfectly safe, perfectly sane, to the stacks where the books were kept after they had been sorted and fed into the reference computer.

He did not try to be thorough or complete. His time was short. He took only the books he could carry, only the books he was sure he wanted: He took *The Mask, the Unicorn, and the Messiah*; the *Index to Fairy Tales, Myths and Legends*; *Barbarous Knowledge*; the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*; *The Masks of God*; and *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. He would need these books when his transformation was complete. They would tell him what to do.

He did not try to find any others. He left the National Library, hugging the books to his broad chest like treasure.

The careful part of him expected to have trouble with his mobile, but he did not. It took him home exactly as it always did.

When he entered his house, he found that Sally had not been brought back. Enwell had not come home. He did not think that he would ever see them again. He was alone.

He took off his clothes because he knew that unicorns did not wear clothes. Then he sat down in the living room and started to read his books.

They did not make sense to him. He knew most of the words, but he could not seem to understand what they were saying. At first he was disappointed in himself. He was afraid that he might not make a very good unicorn. But then he realized the truth. The books did not make sense to him because he was not ready for them. His transformation was not complete yet. When it was complete, he would be able to understand the books. He bobbed his horn joyfully. Then, because he was careful, he spent the rest of the day memorizing as much as he could of the first book, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. He wanted to protect himself in case his books were lost or damaged.

He was still memorizing after dark, and he was not tired. His horn filled him with strength. But then he began to hear a humming noise in the air. It was soft and soothing, and he could not tell how long it had been going on. It was coming from his biomitter. It found a place deep inside him that obeyed it. He lay down on the couch and went to sleep.

But it was not the kind of sleep he was used to. It was not calm and safe. Something in him resisted it, resisted the reassuring hum. His dreams were wild. His emotions were strong, and one of them was uneasiness. His

uneasiness was so strong that it must have been fear. It made him open his eyes.

All the lights were on in the living room, and there were four men in white coats around him. Each of them carried a hypogun. All the hypoguns were pointed at him.

"Don't be afraid," one of the men said, "We won't hurt you. You're going to be all right. Everything is going to be OK."

Norman did not believe him. He saw that the men were gripping their hypoguns tightly. He saw that the men were afraid. They were afraid of him.

He flipped off the couch and jumped. His legs were immensely strong. His jump carried him over the heads of the men. As he passed, he kicked one of the men. Blood appeared on his forehead and spattered his coat, and he fell down and did not move.

The nearest man fired his hypogun. But Norman blocked the penetrating spray with the hard flat heel of his palm. His fingers curled into a hoof, and he hit the man in the chest. The man fell down.

The other two men were trying to run away. They were afraid of him. They were running toward the door. Norman jumped after them and poked the nearest one with his horn. The man seemed to fly away from the horn. He crashed into the other man, and they both crashed against the door and fell down and did not move again. One of them had blood all over his back.

Norman's biomitter was blaring red: *You are ill. You are ill.*

The man Norman had punched was still alive. He was gasping for breath. His face was white with death, but he was able to tap a message into his biomitter. Norman could read his fingers. He was saying, *Seal the house. Keep him trapped. Bring nerve gas.*

Norman went to the man. "Why?" he said. "Why are you trying to kill me?"

The man looked at Norman. He was too close to dying to be afraid anymore. "You're dangerous," he said. He was panting, and blood came out of his mouth. "You're deadly."

"Why?" Norman said. "What's happening to me?"

"Transmutation," the man said. "Atavism. Psychic throwback. You're becoming something. Something that never existed."

'"Never existed'?" Norman said.

“You must’ve been buried,” the man said. “In the subconscious. All this time. You never existed. People made you up. A long time ago. They believed in you. Because they needed to. Because they were afraid.”

More blood came out of his mouth. “How could it happen?” he said. His voice was very weak. “We put fear to sleep. There is no more fear. No more violence. How could it happen?” Then he stopped breathing. But his eyes stayed open, staring at the things he did not understand.

Norman felt a deep sorrow. He did not like killing. A unicorn was not a killing beast. But he had had no choice. He had been cornered. His biomitter was shouting, *You are ill.*

He did not intend to be cornered again. He raised his wrist and touched his biomitter with the tip of his horn. Pieces of metal were torn away, and the bright blood ran down his arm. After that, he did not delay. He took a slipcover from the couch and used it as a sack to carry his books. Then he went to the door and tried to leave his house.

The door did not open. It was locked with heavy steel bolts that he had never seen before. They must have been built into the house. Apparently, the men in white coats, or the medicomputers, were prepared for everything.

They were not prepared for a unicorn. He attacked the door with his horn. His horn was as hard as steel, as hard as magnasite. It was as hard as tung-diamonds. The door burst open, and he went out into the night.

Then he saw more ambulances coming down the road. Ambulances were converging on his house from both directions. He did not know where to run. So he galloped across the street and burst in the door of the house opposite his. The house belonged to his friend Barto. He went to his friend for help.

But when Barto and his wife and his two daughters saw Norman, their faces filled with fear. The daughters began to wail like sirens. Barto and his wife fell to the floor and folded up into balls. Norman broke down the back door and ran out into the service lane between the rows of houses.

He traveled the lane for miles. After the sorrow at his friend’s fear came a great joy at his strength and swiftness. He was stronger than the men in white coats, faster than ambulances. And he had nothing else to be wary of. The medicomputers could not chase him themselves. With his biomitter gone, they could not even tell where he was. And they had no weapons with

which to fight him except men in white coats and ambulances. He was free and strong and exhilarated for the first time in his life.

When daylight came, he climbed up onto the roofs of the houses. He felt safe there, and when he was ready to rest, he slept there alone, facing the sky.

He spent days like that—traveling the city, reading his books and committing them to memory—waiting for his transformation to be complete. When he needed food, he raided grocery stores to get it, though the terror of the people he met filled him with sorrow. And gradually his food-need changed. Then he did not go to the grocery stores anymore. He pranced in the parks at night and cropped the grass and the flowers and ran nickering among the trees.

And his transformation continued. His mane and tail grew thick and exuberant. His face lengthened, and his teeth became stronger. His feet became hooves, and the horny part of his hands grew. White hair the color of moonlight spread across his body and limbs, formed flaring tufts at the backs of his ankles and wrists. His horn grew long and clean and perfectly pointed.

His joints changed also and began to flex in new ways. For a time, this gave him some pain, but soon it became natural to him. He was turning into a unicorn. He was becoming beautiful. At times, there did not seem to be enough room in his heart for the joy the change gave him.

Yet he did not leave the city. He did not leave the people who were afraid of him, though their fear gave him pangs of a loneliness he had never felt before. He was waiting for something. There was something in him that was not complete.

At first, he believed that he was simply waiting for the end of his transformation. But gradually he came to understand that his waiting was a kind of search. He was alone—and unicorns were not meant to be alone, not like this. He was searching the city to see if he could find other people like him, people who were changing.

And at last one night he came in sight of the huge, high structure of the General Hospital. He had been brought there by his search. If there were other people like him, they might have been captured by the men in white coats. They might be prisoners in the Emergency Division of the hospital.

They might be lying helpless while the medicomputers studied them, plotting their destruction.

His nostrils flared angrily at the thought. He stamped his foreleg. He knew what he had to do. He put his sack of books in a place of safety. Then he lowered his head and charged down the road to attack the General Hospital.

He broke down the front doors with his horn and pounded into the corridors. People fled from him in terror. Men and women grabbed hypoguns and tried to fire at him, but he flicked them with the power of his horn, and they fell down. He rampaged on in search of the Emergency Division.

The General Hospital was designed just like the Medical Building and the National Library. He was able to find his way without trouble. Soon he was among the many rooms of the Emergency Division. He kicked open the doors, checked the rooms, checked room after room. They were full of patients. The Emergency Division was a busy place. He had not expected to find that so many people were ill and dangerous. But none of them were what he was looking for. They were not being transformed. They were dying from physical or mental sickness. If any people like him had been brought here, they had already been destroyed.

Red rage filled his heart. He charged on through the halls.

Then suddenly he came to the great room where the medicomputers lived. Rank on rank, they stood before him. Their displays glared evilly at him, and their voices shouted. He heard several of them shout together, "Absolute emergency! Atmospheric control, activate all nerve gas! Saturation gassing, all floors!"

They were trying to kill him. They were going to kill everybody in the hospital.

The medicomputers were made of magnasite and plasmium. Their circuits were fireproof. But they were not proof against the power of his horn. When he attacked them, they began to burn in white fire, as incandescent as the sun.

He could hear gas hissing into the air. He took a deep breath and ran.

The gas was hissing into all the corridors of the hospital. Patients began to die. Men and women in white coats began to die. Norman began to think that he would not be able to get out of the hospital before he had to breathe.

A moment later, the fire in the medicomputers ignited the gas. The gas burned. Oxygen tanks began to explode. Dispensaries went up in flames. The fire extinguishers could not stop the intense heat of burning magnasite and plasmium. When the cylinders of nerve gas burst, they had enough force to shatter the floors and walls.

Norman flashed through the doors and galloped into the road with the General Hospital raging behind him like a furnace.

He breathed the night air deep into his chest and skittered to a stop on the far side of the road to shake the sparks out of his mane. Then he turned to watch the hospital burn.

At first he was alone in the road. The people who lived nearby did not come to watch the blaze. They were afraid of it. They did not try to help the people who escaped the flames.

But then he saw a young girl come out from between the houses. She went into the road to look at the fire.

Norman pranced over to her. He reared in front of her.

She did not run away.

She had a lump on her forehead like the base of a horn or the nub of a new antler. There was a smile on her lips, as if she were looking at something beautiful.

And there was no fear in her eyes at all.

The Unicorn Trade

Karen Anderson

THEY GRAZE AT night, the unicorns, upon the fresh-dewed grasses,
Molten starlight flying as they toss their sapphire horns,
They step with light and dainty hoof below the stony passes,
Shimmer under shadow where the nightingale mourns.
The bright manes ripple over dapple flanks,
Quarter-moon racing past cloudy banks—
Now on the warning wind of dawn they flee night's crimson death;
They sleep in velvet forest shade; they spice it with their breath.
The castle queens it on her hill, the crown of pride and power,
Turreted and traceried and carven like a gem,
With sunny court and golden hall, with wall and lordly tower
Rich-tapestried with vine and grape, with rose on thorny stem;
Rubies, damask, pomanders and swords—
Wild loves, black hates, delights of wine and words—
Let pipe and tabor play! And thus, hand resting light on hand,
With quicker-beating heart we'll foot the skipping allemande.

There's goodly trade in unicorns, in castles and their treasure,
Dragons are much demanded, endless caverns, eagly crags,
There's trade in rings of elven work, in songs of striding measure,
Star-smiting curses, aye, and quests, and splendid thumping brags.
Come buy! Come choose your heart's desire of these,
Fable and dream, wondrous commodities.
Already yours, these unicorns, as aught you owned yestre'en,
This castle, real as memory, that none but you have seen.

Olfert Dapper’s Day

Peter S. Beagle

DR. OLFERT DAPPER had never attended any medical school: neither in Amsterdam, where he was born, nor in Utrecht, where he had first begun employing the title *Doctor Medicinae*, after two years of occasional attendance at the university. Nor, in candor, had he ever visited India, China, Persia, or Africa, about all of which lands he had nevertheless published voluminously detailed and well-received books. A placid, sedentary, somewhat portly man by nature, he had seen no reason to disturb a peaceful existence by crossing undependable oceans, conducting tedious expeditions, or otherwise placing the said existence at risk of discomfort or termination. Much better to write out of a fecund imagination, an even more bountiful fantasy life, and the rich sense of survival that had served him so well for nearly forty-five years. He was, take him for all in all, a pleasant soul who had always trusted in the trust of others, and who had, until quite recently, never found that faith misplaced.

Unfortunately, his confidence in the gullibility of country bumpkins from Eck en Wiel had lately been badly shaken when one bumpkin turned out to be related—who could have known?—to a seriously powerful member of the States-General capable of recognizing a very slightly fraudulent land contract when he saw one. On the whole, as a presumed man of medicine, Dr. Dapper recommended travel to himself: travel for reasons of health and longevity; travel to destinations which seemed a good deal less important than the swiftness of his departure. The beadle, summons under his arm, was knocking on Dr. Dapper’s front door as that good entrepreneur slipped out the back way, his quickly packed valise firm in his grip.

But the beadle, a practiced hand in such matters, had thoughtfully stationed two large men halfway down the muddy alley that led from Olfert Dapper’s rear door to the street. Both men carried heavy bludgeons, which twitched very slightly as they waited, like the tails of stalking cats. Dr.

Dapper never hesitated at the sight of them, but walked slowly forward, one hand held up in a sign of hopeless surrender, which his shamed-spaniel expression mirrored. The other arm hung limply at his side, as though he had forgotten the battered valise dangling at the end of it. The two bullies grinned at each other, anticipating quick remuneration from their employer and an early night at Fat Mina's on the Zuilenstraat. They even glanced momentarily over Dr. Dapper's shoulder, calling their triumph to the beadle as he lumbered through the open back door. This was a mistake.

Olfert Dapper disapproved of running on both general and practical principles, but in a real sense his entire life had been made up of exceptions to rules. He was almost on the beadle's men when his forlorn shuffle turned into a sprinter's burst from the blocks. He swatted one half-raised club away with his valise, simultaneously kicked the second man reprehensibly low, and lunged between them to race away down the alley. The beadle shouted to him to come back, but Dr. Dapper could not believe that he was truly serious.

He was briefly impressed with his own turn of speed, since he had not had to flee physical attack since his earliest youth. Unfortunately, he had not bargained for his pursuers' endurance and determination. Hulking they were, and stupid they undoubtedly were; but they saw Fat Mina's slipping away, and they came pounding tirelessly after a plump middle-aged man. He could not lose them. His breath was coming hard now, and he began to be afraid.

At one time—fifteen minutes ago, perhaps—Olfert Dapper had known very nearly every grand street and unpaved lane or alleyway in Utrecht, as well as each dwelling, tavern, shop front, or business of every possible degree of legitimacy and possible usefulness. Now they blurred and ran thickly together like spilled paint before his eyes as he wheezed by, and the only clear impression he had of any of them was that no door swung open for him, and not a single soul ran out to his aid. But it was not in his nature to feel wounded or abandoned; he was too busy hoping that he would at least not disgrace himself by throwing up when the beadle's men ran him to earth. He was a proud man, in his way.

But then a diligence rumbled around an approaching corner, with the driver's tip of his tall hat signifying that the small coach was unoccupied and available for hire. Dr. Dapper wrenched the door open, scrambled

inside, and sprawled out over the seat while the diligence was still moving. It was some while before he was able to sit up and breathe without pain; consequently, he never had the chance to wave blithely back at his frustrated pursuers, as he would have preferred to do. But their furious shouts carried to his ears for a surprisingly long time, so he did have that satisfaction.

The diligence, after some intense negotiation, took him by a circuitous route to the great—and hearteningly anonymous—seaport of Rotterdam. Coachman and passenger had developed a companionable rapport during the journey; and Dr. Dapper's driver, on arriving at their destination, recommended an inn, counseled against certain others, and suggested that a man as much in demand as Dr. Dapper appeared to be might be well-advised to consider the harbor at his first opportunity. "You can't go back to Utrecht. Not for a year, maybe two years, maybe never. Rotterdam's no place for you, either—your little chums'll track you here, sooner or later. And there's too many of your sort here already." His eyes grew unfocused, and seemed momentarily to change color. "Me, I'd be looking at the ships."

Dr. Dapper, for all the writing he had done about traveling to strange foreign lands, had in fact never been aboard anything larger than a duck-pond raft, and that as a child. Wandering slowly along the waterfront the next day, and the days after, studying the schooners, frigates, merchantmen, whalers, and fishing boats—all so imposing at their quays, so small when he looked out at the rain-gray water beyond—he felt strangely lonely, and very far from all he understood. He looked in the windows of chandlers' shops, recognizing almost nothing he saw there; he heard songs he had never heard in his life; he cautiously sampled fruits and shellfish he did not recognize from barrows manned by peddlers clad in bright colors, who spoke no language he knew; he sidestepped invitations from girls who needed no language. But most of all, he smelled the sea.

A burly, one-eyed captain with a Frisian accent eventually agreed to ferry him across the Atlantic to make, like so many other passengers, a fresh start in the New World. The fare was remitted on Dr. Dapper's agreement to serve as ship's physician; even surgeon, if this should prove necessary. The voyage, fortunately, turned out to be a remarkably tranquil one, except for Dr. Dapper's stomach, which had loudly announced its distaste for a life on the rolling deep before the ship had even cast off in Rotterdam harbor. For

the next seven weeks, he was his own best patient—and, fortunately for all concerned, very nearly the only one. He did, in mid-Atlantic, have to coax the ship's cat down from the rigging, into which it had been deposited and abandoned by a malicious sailor. Dr. Dapper, who liked cats, tripped the sailor overboard not long afterward. The ship lost half a day's progress coming about to pick the man up, and the captain was quite cross.

Dr. Dapper disembarked in the Americas at Falmouth, on the northeastern coast, and spent a weary, anxious week trying to decide where to go from there. Back to Utrecht would have been his most fervent choice: never having ventured beyond the Netherlands, except in his excellent imagination, he had no difficulty picturing himself being murdered by any of the raw-faced, raw-voiced people thronging the muddy streets and unspeakable inns, or being torn to pieces by wild animals, or being tortured at the stake by Red Indians. But Utrecht remained out of the question, and staying in Falmouth was just as frightening, since he had no faith that the men he had offended would let three thousand miles of ocean keep their hands from his collar: for all he knew, the next sail on the horizon might convey his continued pursuit. Despite the lure of Falmouth's many ingenuous gulls, veritable canvases for an artist like himself, there was nothing to do but bury himself for as long as necessary in the forests and backlands of this so-called New World. The hunt would surely cool down, sooner or later . . . surely.

Supply wagons, fur traders' pack mules, *voyageurs'* canoes, and his own blistered feet eventually delivered Olfert Dapper into the Territory of Sagadahock, that province of Britain located east of the Kennebec River in the vaguely delineated colony of Maine. The French had their own name for the region, Acadia, and their own longstanding claims of ownership, but in the village of No Popery Dr. Dapper encountered few French, all of them Huguenot refugees. The local settlers were mainly recusants from the Roman-leaning reign of Charles II—English Puritans, Dutch Calvinists, and Salzburger Lutherans, plus a sprinkling of Anabaptists and a few Jews. Surrounding the village were largely ignored populations of Micmac, Abenaki, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot Indians, most of them good-humored and rather bewildered. Dr. Dapper rather took to the Abenaki. He found their peaceful dispositions and placidly bleak view of the universe comfortingly akin to his own.

For the rest, he liked neither his fellow colonists—whom he judged ignorant, unsophisticated, mostly illiterate, and generally too poor and unimaginative to be worth the effort of swindling—nor his enforced frontier existence. The houses of No Popery were, without exception, constructed of rough timber, their roofs either thatched or bearing a fine crop of grass, for better insulation, their chimneys built from clay-covered logs, their windows not even of horn but mere oiled paper. Sanitary arrangements were worse than anything he had endured aboard ship, and the climate was, as he wrote in his journal,

> *". . . insalubrious in the extreme, being pitilessly hot and miserably cold by turns, and plagued in all seasons by wicked varieties of insect life such as never we encountered in the Netherlands. Nor is this all, for there are wolves larger than the European sort, whose main prey is a kind of monstrous deer known to the Indians as a moose, and there is also a creature like an unspotted leopard, and great bears too, and not a soul with whom one can exchange ideas in a civilized manner. In truth, they are welcome to their Sagadahock, the lot of them, and it to them, and I am surely the most wretched Hollander that ever was. Worst of all, by acclamation they have made me their physician, and apothecary as well, as it was on the ship . . ."*

Coming from as small and topographically tidy a country as Holland, with its gray, sea-menaced flatness and its cathedral skies, he was overwhelmed in both senses of the word by this New World. Everything was too big, monstrously big—trees, animals, rivers, and bellowing waterfalls, even the very seasons themselves, storm and snow and April alike—while the shocking splendor of the changing leaves; the wildflowers; the vast, foggy hills; the dark, virgin, sweet-smelling earth made him want to hide. *I would be better in prison. I have no business here.*

There are a limited number of crises and emergencies for which a ship's doctor, however counterfeit, needs to be prepared. Fractured limbs, scurvy,

drunkenness, various souvenirs of Venus, even treatment after a disciplinary flogging—these can be anticipated and prepared for, even by a reasonably experienced impostor, with, in general, no worse damage left in his wake than might be expected from a genuine doctor. But in an isolated settlement of assorted dissenters, fanatics, and castaways, stranded in a completely strange land, with neither impressive-looking implements nor reasonably harmless medications at hand (though the local Abenaki were sometimes whimsically helpful here), Olfert Dapper was most often the only resort of people who had fallen down cliffs; abruptly removed hands or legs while cutting firewood; contracted a disease of which he knew neither the name, the cause, nor the treatment; or come off second-best in some encounter with a bear or a panther. Even had he actually possessed a medical degree, it would likely have proved worse than useless, faced with the dangers and mysteries of Sagadahock. He felt almost as sorry for his patients as he did for himself.

"Wretched Hollander" or no, paradoxically, he was held in higher respect in No Popery than he ever had been in his homeland.

Until recently he had been acceptably successful in his various questionable enterprises, if *successful* can be defined as *getting away with it*. Not a day of his life had been spent in prison, physical labor, or repentance: a situation that felt far more natural to him than holiness to a saint, since sainthood involves constant struggle and failure, and struggle again. If he had not had a single true friend, there had been few true enemies—or, at least, none who knew where he lived—and it can honestly be said that he had borne ill will toward no man living. Nor woman, either, if it came to that; except perhaps for one Margot Zeldenthuis, who had long since vanished from his life, along with the forty-nine guilders under his pillow. Yet he sighed more often than he cursed when he thought of soft-footed Margot. Like his victims, Olfert Dapper had always had a streak of romance in his nature . . . just less than they.

In No Popery, to his horror, he was *needed*. There was no one else in the village who could do what he did, even if he could do little. Gaining trust had always been his living; more than that, it had been his gift, his art, his entire existence and his purpose for existence. Trust bestowed, trust gratefully volunteered, was another matter entirely, and Dr. Dapper would have been the first to admit that, if there had been anyone in his new life to

admit it to. His patients—who, for the most part, paid him in venison, wild turkeys, rabbits, vegetables from their small gardens, and labor around the tiny house they had built for him—remained admiring and utterly loyal, whether or not his medications, all invented out of thin blue air, were successful. Socially, he ranked with the minister, a grim, lantern-jawed soul named Giles Kirtley, lean as a winter wolf; slightly ahead of Matthew Prouty, the schoolmaster; and he was a frequent guest at far more well-provided tables than was even Nathaniel Markham, the wealthiest farmer of No Popery, who had real clapboards covering the raw frame of his house, and real glass in his windows. These, according to the lights of the village, were successful men: Dr. Olfert Dapper was *celebrated*.

But the nearest thing he had to a friend, or even a drinking companion, had liquor not been harshly forbidden in No Popery, was an Abenaki Indian named—as near as he could ever translate it for Dr. Dapper—Rain Coming, who dwelled with his tribe in a birchbark village some three or four miles away. He was short, square-built, and ageless, his skin the texture of granite and the color of a worn old coin, and he actually spoke only a little more English than the handful of Abenaki words that Dr. Dapper had awkwardly acquired. Yet somehow they were comfortable in one another's company, and could spend unlikely amounts of time together in complete silence. The Indian's herb lore, proffered in brief grunts and gestures, had resulted in more than one miraculous-appearing cure, for which Dr. Dapper received the credit. In return, he did his best to teach Rain Coming how to cheat at cards. That enterprise failed, due primarily to the other's complete lack of the competitive instinct; or, rather (at least, so Dr. Dapper always felt), to Rain Coming's serene certainty that whatever the game, he had already triumphed simply by taking part, and there was nothing further to say. Dr. Dapper would have given a good deal to possess such inborn assurance.

Rigorously honest with himself, if with no other, Dr. Dapper never blamed Mistress Remorse Kirtley, the minister's thin, whispering wife, for luring him into temptation. While she was hardly the most attractive woman of his extensive experience, marriage to the good reverend having bleached most of the color and spirit out of her, curiously she aroused Olfert Dapper's occasional sympathy as well as his lust, which was not something that had happened to him before. Her husband suffered frequently from what Dr. Dapper pronounced to be "dyspeptic lassitude," but which even a

middle-aged Dutch cardsharp could recognize as a stomach exhausted by constant and indiscriminate overeating. He treated these regular complaints with various decoctions of dandelion, mint, wormwood, and yarrow, and spent much time in the kitchen with the grateful, attentive Mistress Kirtley, carefully explicating these remedies to her. In this manner they became well-acquainted, though Dr. Dapper was careful never to presume on the warming relationship. The first commandment of his chosen profession, passed down through every age of mankind, remained, as it still remains, *"Thou shalt let them come to you . . ."*

The days passed, and the seasons passed: the hottest summer Olfert Dapper had ever endured crisping into the most dazzlingly delightful autumn by far, then hardening into a winter as merciless as any he had known in the Netherlands—more so, indeed, for the complete lack of civilized refuge, such as a lively coffee shop or a cheerful bordello. Dr. Dapper spent those endless months most often in bed, or huddled at his fireside with a quilt over his shoulders, his feet in a bucket of heated snow water, and his mind lost in memories of a Utrecht pub, drinking spiced *jenever* with Margot Zeldenthuis. Would she remember him, after all this time? More to the point, would that Eck en Viel idiot recognize him on the street, and could his States-General cousin, or whatever he was, still be holding a grudge? How much longer must he remain exiled in this fearful, barbaric place? He thought of the canals of Utrecht, and of the sharp wind over the Rhône, and for the first time since coming ashore felt no slightest trace of hope.

Spring slipped up imperceptibly, its timorous inroads into the iron cold like the forays of the turning tide just beginning to nibble at a child's invulnerable sand fortress. Dr. Dapper was yet suffering from chilblains when Rain Coming, whom he had not seen for a good month—and whom he rather suspected actually hibernated during the worst of the winter—came to tell him that the ice was two days from breaking on the Kennebec, and that the first rains, a day after, would almost immediately produce the various wild herbs Dr. Dapper had grudgingly begun to depend on for his improvised medicines. They set out together on the first nearly-warm day in April, with a pale, watery sun overhead and a small breeze honing its edge on the back of Dr. Dapper's neck.

They walked for a long time, in and out of pine groves, crossing muddy meadows, up and down the slopes of thickly wooded valleys and ravines. Their path seemed aimless, almost without direction, but periodically Rain Coming would halt and nod toward a few tiny petals in the shadow of a tree, or a fungus growing on that same tree; a single mushroom poking its brown head out of a patch of damp grass; a few queer-looking leaves, invariably hanging somewhere out of reach. And Olfert Dapper would dutifully climb and stretch, tug and twist and pluck, sometimes digging with both hands to fetch some plant up by its roots, and then drop his find carefully into the sack he carried at his waist, and trudge on beside the Abenaki. The sack grew heavier.

It was nearly twilight, with a half-moon already rising, when Rain Coming finally grunted in satisfaction, and they turned back toward No Popery. Weary as he was, Dr. Dapper was anxious to move quickly, knowing that the great wild cats whose broad footprints he had seen several times—"catamounts," the villagers called them—hunted mainly at dusk and dawn. He also knew that the black bears of the region were just waking now from their winter sleep, most often hungry and irritable. He walked increasingly close beside Rain Coming as the sky darkened, even bumping against him from time to time.

When his companion halted abruptly, and he heard, directly ahead, the sound of a large body moving in a thicket, then glimpsed the shadow in the moonlight, Dr. Dapper froze where he stood and refused to go further. Rain Coming's nods and earnest gestures of reassurance made no difference, so the Abenaki finally shrugged—something Dr. Dapper had never seen him or any Indian do before—and walked calmly on, quickly vanishing into the same thicket. He did not look back.

The threat of abandonment changed Dr. Dapper's mind for him, and he hurried to catch up with Rain Coming. The Abenaki had halted again at the far edge of the clearing, staring toward a rough, stony meadow slanting slightly uphill. They had come that way, and Dr. Dapper remembered glimpsing deer there, and stumbling over two or three burrows of the badger-like diggers the colonists called "land-beavers." But now there was nothing at all to be seen in the meadow . . .

. . . except something that should not have been.

Dr. Dapper did not write of it for a long time, for reasons that he never could explain to himself. When he did come to describe what he saw that spring night, remembering his fear that he might have been hallucinating out of weariness, he wrote:

> *". . . by moonlight its coat is a kind of golden-gray, the very color of the moon itself. It seems a sturdy-built creature, though rather small—I cannot imagine it bearing a person of my stature for any distance. The hoofs are indeed cloven, as Pliny attests, though he is much in error regarding nearly every other aspect of the beast. The tail is lionlike, the mane as long as that of the wild ponies of the English moors—though less thick and shaggy—and the celebrated horn above its eyes would seem disproportionate in length and evident mass to the musculature of its rather slender neck. Yet so is the unicorn made."*

Dr. Dapper cried out at the sight, a loss of self-control quite outside his usual humours. The unicorn wheeled on the instant, its horn fiery as a new scar in the moonlight—and then it was gone, leaving no footprints behind on the wet and muddy hillside . . . leaving nothing but the wondering glory in Dr. Dapper's eyes.

Rain Coming looked at Dr. Dapper without speaking, and Dr. Dapper looked back at him. There was no need to speak on either side: what had been seen, even for the single crystal moment, was greater than accusation, beyond apology. They walked on back to the village of No Popery together, bound in an understanding far greater than when they had set out that morning, so long ago.

What Rain Coming thought of their encounter, Dr. Dapper never knew, nor expected to know. Indeed, when he asked his friend whether the Abenaki tongue even had a word for *unicorn*, Rain Coming pretended not to comprehend, and grew plainly irritated when the matter was pressed further. He came less often to the village in those later days, and was even less conversational when he did. He seemed to Dr. Dapper almost to have set his body aside to follow in his puzzled heart whatever that moment on

the meadow had meant to him. A good—if uneasy—Netherlandish Calvinist, Dr. Dapper mused at times over the question of whether Indians could become saints.

Dr. Dapper missed his friend, but Rain Coming's place had largely been taken by a conflagration of yearning to see the unicorn again. He spoke to no one about it—certainly not to the Reverend Kirtley, who would have immediately denounced his vision as a sending from hell. Nor did Dr. Dapper consider taking Prouty, the schoolmaster, into his confidence, for the man was even more fearfully rigid than the reverend, who at least had his unshakable faith to bolster him; while Prouty, Dr. Dapper suspected, needed only the least suggestion that the universe was not as he had been taught—such as the existence of unicorns—to push him quite over the edge of reason, likely into Quakerism, or something worse. Dr. Dapper had enough on his conscience, such as it was, without the added responsibility for destroying Master Prouty's trembling foundations.

It does say something to his good, surely; to the influence that the simple life and simple values of No Popery had had on him—or perhaps it was only the silent, mysterious reproach of Rain Coming—that it never occurred to Dr. Dapper that there could be immense profit in the possession of a live unicorn, or even the hide, hair, and horn of a dead one. He merely wanted to see it again; and he knew without questioning, as one sometimes knows these things, that he never would be allowed to see it alone. It had clearly never been meant for him in the first place, but rather for his wise and strangely innocent companion, for Rain Coming of the Abenaki. *Whom do I know in this savage land who is wise and innocent in that same way, who deserves to see what I by chance saw? With all their talk of Jesus, and all their damned endless praying, there must be someone!*

And it was at that moment, in the spring, that Remorse Kirtley came to him, as he had known she would.

It was not an occasion of sin that brought her, but the perfectly legitimate pretext of her husband's rebellious stomach quarreling with his eight-course dinner, as it and he were habituated to do. If Dr. Dapper could possibly attend on him . . . ?

Remorse Kirtley was not a beauty, but her eyes were the deep, sweet brown of a sunflower heart, and her mouth, close to, was not nearly as thin and prim and small as it appeared most of the time. Indeed, she was

definitely standing closer to him than was at all proper for a good Puritan wife, and it was with a real and regretful effort that Dr. Dapper banished temptation and agreed to accompany her once more to the reverend's bedside. A thought had occurred to him, gazing into those sunflower eyes.

While the infusion of wild grasses that he had learned would not only soothe the reverend's much put-upon intestines but send him off to sleep as well was steeping, he told the minister, "That, I fear, was the last of the herbal medicines that I have gathered with my heathen friend of the Abenaki. Tomorrow, or the next day, I must go forth again to replenish my supply, and I would ask that you give your wife leave to accompany me. These plants grow close to the ground, and my eyes are not what they were."

Reverend Kirtley was a fool, but not quite the fool he seemed. Having long since reassured himself of his wife's holy unattractiveness, his main objection to her passing an afternoon in Dr. Dapper's company concerned not what she might do, but that she might be thought to be doing it. "It would give the impression of unseemliness," he protested, "of impropriety. Surely another—a child, perhaps, to avoid false appearances . . . ?"

Olfert Dapper shrugged plaintively, if such a thing were possible. "The little ones can so rarely identify what I seek," he pointed out, "while their elders know, but cannot see. Mistress Remorse would be the perfect choice, as—ah—intimately acquainted with your intestinal needs as she is, and with the exact admixture and administration of my medicinal agents. Still, if you would prefer that I employ a stranger, which would require at least some inescapable discussion—"

What had worked in Amsterdam and Utrecht worked just as flawlessly in the Territory of Sagadahock. The reverend hastily disavowed any such suggestion, assuring Dr. Dapper that he might borrow his good wife's assistance on whatever day suited him best, for all the world as though he were granting him the use of a favored spade or horse. Dr. Dapper suggested the following Monday, and Reverend Kirtley agreed eagerly. Mistress Remorse Kirtley's opinion was not solicited, which did not seem to distress her at all.

She was waiting, dressed as roughly and soberly as any farm laborer, when Dr. Dapper came to the minister's house at dawn on that Monday morning. They spoke little on setting off, making use of a route that kept

them largely out of sight of anyone who might be working his fields early or slipping home from some wrongful enjoyment with a view to avoiding the village constable's eye. Mistress Kirtley was hardly the equal of Rain Coming in espying a half-hidden leaf in a patch of nettles, or a few wild berries among the weeds reclaiming a long-abandoned garden; but she did well enough, and she kept easy pace with Dr. Dapper, her stride suggesting longer legs than he had permitted himself to imagine. Once or twice, when he glanced sideways to see her lifting her pale face, eyes almost closed, to the warming sun, she would turn and show him a very small smile, such as he had never seen on her mouth before. He fancied that perhaps no one else ever had.

She appeared not to notice that Dr. Dapper was slowly, subtly bending their search in a wide curve back toward the little meadow where a greater wonder even than her smile had come upon him. But when they sat down together upon the ground just beyond the clearing—considerably dryer now than then—to eat the midday meal she had prepared of dried meat, cheese, barley bread, and mild ale, Mistress Kirtley looked straight across the lunch into Dr. Dapper's eyes and said quietly, "I know this place. There are none of your herbs growing here."

"That is true, ma'am," Dr. Dapper replied, for he always knew when lying would not serve him. It was a skill that set him apart from most other practitioners of his silken art.

"Then why did you bring me here?" Mistress Kirtley neither raised her voice nor showed any sign of alarm. She might have been asking the question out of casual politeness, had it not been for the slightest dilation of her eyes.

"Because there is something I greatly wish you to see." Dr. Dapper nodded calmly toward the meal laid out on a kerchief between them. "Do enjoy, as I am enjoying it, the repast you have so clearly gone to a deal of trouble to prepare for us—and wait meanwhile. Only wait a little, dear Mistress Kirtley."

In fact, for all the assurance in his tone, he had no notion whether the unicorn would appear at all. He knew it had been no phantasm, no trick of the moon or of his mind—one look at Rain Coming's reaction to the vision had told him that—but whether or not it would return to the meadow, whether or not a certain legend might prove true . . . all that was pure

gamble, and Olfert Dapper in his soul was as pure a gambler as had ever lived in Old World or New, in Utrecht or No Popery. He washed his meat and cheese down with his ale and smiled at Mistress Kirtley, and she smiled back at him. And they waited together.

But the day was warm, the ale excellent, and the early gnats' almost inaudible buzzing became a kind of lullaby for Dr. Dapper. He never admitted that he had been asleep when the unicorn came; but it was Remorse Kirtley's soft gasp that roused him, and he saw her on her feet with both hands pressed to her mouth and her dark Dutch-style cap fallen to the ground. He had never seen her rich brown hair loose before.

The unicorn was standing in the center of the meadow, facing her, plainly considering her, as surely as she was taking its truth into herself. By moonlight it had seemed more delicately made, almost fragile; today it appeared not only larger than he remembered, but quite possibly dangerous, with the sun glinting on the long spiral horn. Dr. Dapper, rising slowly to his feet, noticed for the first time the small curl of beard beneath its lower jaw, such as he had given to his depiction of a lion in his book on Africa. Did that mean the creature was male? Was it a sign of maturity? These and other questions tumbled roundabout through his mind, for Dr. Dapper had always possessed the passionate curiosity of the true scientist in his inmost nature. He had, however, always been careful not to let it get out of hand.

Remorse Kirtley held out both of her open hands to the unicorn. It tossed its head once, like a horse, but did not whinny or nicker—indeed, Dr. Dapper had never heard it make a sound. It paced slowly toward the woman, its horn pointing at her heart. She did not flinch, but sank slowly into a sitting position, her legs folding under her as gracefully as those of the unicorn's as it lowered its head into her lap. The horn lay across her thighs.

Dr. Dapper could see her face now. It wore the dazed, foolishly transcendent expression he had seen and scorned in so many of the paintings of his homeland: Mary receiving the Annunciation, saints ravished by the converse of angels, holy hermits gazing up enraptured at golden clouds aswarm with cherubim . . . every one looking as gloriously vacant as Remorse Kirtley looked now. Dr. Dapper envied her, and made notes for another book.

He could not tell whether the unicorn was actually asleep. Remorse Kirtley stroked its neck and played timidly with the white feathers of its mane—she never touched the horn—but the unicorn's eyes remained closed, and its slow breathing never altered. Dr. Dapper thought, in a vague and distant way, *This is the moment when the knights rush out from cover and spring on it, as it rouses a moment too late. I know what I should do, if I were a braver man, and a worse one.* The unicorn smelled to him like new bread, and like new candles, and, strangely, like cool old wells in shadowy gardens.

How long the unicorn slept in Remorse Kirtley's lap, Dr. Dapper never knew. He stood where he was, while the sun moved and the ragged grass whispered, and the tiny insects danced in the sunlight. The unicorn's sides breathed in and out, like those of any other drowsing animal, and now and then it twitched its lion-tufted tail to brush away a fly. And Remorse Kirtley sat utterly motionless, her eyes fixed, as Dr. Dapper imagined, on the world the unicorn had come from. Now and then she turned her head toward him, but he knew that she never saw him at all.

Then, in time, the unicorn rose, and looked in Remorse Kirtley's face, and brushed its horn over her hair, and went away.

Neither Mistress Kirtley nor Dr. Dapper moved for a long while afterwards, not until she stood up in her turn and went to him, and he put his arms around her. They remained so, with nothing sinful or adulterous in their embrace; but by and by she asked him in a small voice, "How did you know?"

"I did *not* know," Olfert Dapper answered her candidly. "I guessed only."

"That the wife of the Reverend Giles Kirtley might yet be a virgin? A clever guess, wise Doctor." She leaned closer, pressing breasts not as childish as he had imagined against him. "And one deserving of some return, surely?" The sunflower eyes were soft and tender.

Strangely, it was Dr. Dapper who held back in that moment, actually putting away from himself the woman whose mysteries had tantalized his dreams all that winter. "Good mistress," he heard himself saying, to his own considerable amazement, "should we do this, you will—thou wilt—forfeit thy chance ever again to see a unicorn—to hold a unicorn in thy lap. I am not such a scoundrel as to wish to deprive thee of such a blessing." He was horrified by the sound of his own earnest pomposity, the more so because it

was uttered with truly good intent. *Some of us were not born for the generous gesture.*

But Remorse Kirtley laughed at him, and stretched her arms stiffly out on his shoulders, so as to hold his head firmly while she looked into his eyes. "One unicorn in a lifetime is a miracle beyond anyone's deserving, virgin or no. More than one . . . no, no, Doctor, that is for another life than mine." She kissed him then, with a force that would likely have knocked him down, had she not still been holding him upright. Still gripping his eyes with her own, she said, with as much gravity as he had spoken to her, "The unicorn set me free, can you understand me? Freed me from the world I have always been taught, and always believed, was the only world for a Christian soul. While I sat there and held him, he came into me—how else should I put it, dear Doctor?—he came into me, and showed me the magic beyond poor, crabbed No Popery, the beauty beyond the sour singsong God of my worship. And for that I will forever be more grateful to thee than anyone else is ever likely to be, my scoundrelly friend."

She kissed him again, and then she stood back from him a little and slowly began to unlace her drab dark bodice, never taking her eyes from his. She said, "Now it is for thee to complete my liberation. Help me here . . ."

And he did help her, his usually deft fingers as clumsy as those of an ignorant youth, and they did indeed cleave together, and were one flesh, as the Bible recommends and approves.

Later, drowsy in the dappled shade, his herb-gathering bag pillowing both of their heads, he said, "It grieves me yet that you tossed away so lightly your chance to ever again call a unicorn. Truly, I never brought you here for that"—which was only half a lie—"but because I wanted to see the creature a second time. I cannot help feeling at fault."

Propped on one elbow, her own eyes heavy, she made severe reply. "I tossed nothing away—and certainly never for you, vain man, but for myself. What I have lost, I gave away freely. Even the God of No Popery would understand that difference. The unicorn understood."

Whereupon, and without explanation, Remorse Kirtley began to cry. Deciding for perhaps the hundredth time in his life that he knew nothing about women, Dr. Dapper let her tears dry on his chest and throat; and somewhere in the middle of that they were one flesh once again, and she

was giggling like a girl about something she wouldn't share. When he asked she only laughed harder, her hair a twisting whip across his face, and he became fascinated then by other things, like the little pink mole between her shoulder blades, a miniature fleur-de-lys that he suspected the Reverend Kirtley had never seen.

They walked back side by side, just as they had set out; but when Dr. Dapper reached to take her hand, like any village swain, Mistress Kirtley shook her head and pulled away. Hair invisible again under the Dutch cap, bodice laced to near-constriction, long brown dress respectably free of any telltale grass stains, she had reassumed the role of meek Puritan goodwife, playing it with the passionate attention to detail of the actress she had spent her life becoming. Even when she glanced sideways at him and smiled just a trifle, it was not the smile of Remorse Kirtley. Dr. Dapper knew that smile well.

They parted at the outskirts of the village: he to his mortar and pestle and improvised scales, she to tend her husband, and to prepare a full dinner after a full day. When, at Reverend Kirtley's next visceral complaint, Dr. Dapper hurried to him with his potions already prepared, there was never the smallest suggestion that anything ignoble might have passed between anyone and anyone else; nor did Mistress Kirtley do more than nod attentively at her family physician's instructions and notate them without quite looking at him. Dr. Dapper stayed longer than he might have, constantly attempting surreptitiously to catch her eye, but he had no luck.

News of the colonists' various homelands came infrequently at the best of times—and not at all during the winter months—and was delivered haphazardly, most often by traveling peddlers, tinkers, and circuit-riding preachers who chanced through No Popery. Olfert Dapper had received no messages at all from the Netherlands since his arrival, and had almost resigned himself, not only to the probability of spending at least another year in this drearily savage New World, but also to the worse horror of realizing that he was gradually adapting to his life here. He liked and respected the Abenaki of his acquaintance, and he very nearly liked two or three of the settlers, and he was even developing a certain taste for succotash.

Oh, whatever might be waiting for him back in Utrecht, he had to get out of this place!

Mistress Remorse Kirtley went on about her business as a dutiful No Popery wife, cooking and gardening and praying and keeping a proper house, never allowing herself to be alone in Dr. Dapper's company for more than the few minutes it might take him to hand her his newest medication for her husband's ever-truculent stomach and instruct her in its application. She kept her eyes cast down at all times, her hair completely covered, and her modest bearing an example for all Puritan women. Dr. Dapper, thinking about it, could never say whether he actually loved her—love, as it is generally used, being an emotion as honestly foreign to him as the Turkish language, or the finer points of infralapsarianism. Neither could he call it plain sinful lust anymore: it was, perhaps, that, having glimpsed the mysterious heart of the minister's wife, he simply wanted to see it again, more than he had ever wanted to see the unicorn a second time. It has been mentioned that Olfert Dapper had more than a little of the romantic in his nature.

He went on occasion, when he had the time free (his fraudulent medical practice having gradually approached the genuine), to the meadow where he and Remorse Kirtley and the unicorn had once been together. He had no expectation of finding either one of them there, but it comforted him strangely to stand exactly where he had watched in numbed wonder as the unicorn lowered its head into her lap; and where, a world afterward, he had helped her unlace her bodice, while she never took her eyes from his.

Once he encountered his old Abenaki companion Rain Coming standing in the same place, his black eyes watching everything, yet seeing nothing that Olfert Dapper could see. They greeted each other briefly and soberly, and Dr. Dapper said gently, after a while, "It will never come here again. I cannot say how I know that, but I do."

Rain Coming nodded a very little. He said only two words. "She come."

Dr. Dapper stared at him. "*She?* Whom do you . . . Do you mean Mistress Kirtley?" A squirrel observing them from a branch abruptly dashed away at the sound of his voice.

The Abenaki met his eyes calmly, taking a long time before he answered. "When you go home. She come then."

"When I go home . . ." A sudden immense sadness filled Dr. Dapper's chest, and the words came out almost in a whisper, in contrast to his earlier cry. He said, "But I may never go home, my friend. There are some very

angry people waiting there for me, and they might even put me in prison. *Prison.*" He repeated the word, emphasizing it carefully, knowing that the Abenaki, like the other Algonquian tribes in general, had no real equivalent for such a word, such a concept. He said again, "I do not know whether I will ever go home."

"You go home soon." Rain Coming's own voice was slow and certain. "She come to Abenaki when you go."

"Why then?" Olfert Dapper demanded. "There is no connection between us anymore—we barely speak, except about her husband's medicines. Why would she run off to your people when I am gone?"

But Rain Coming himself was gone, in that particularly disturbing way of being gone that he had, which the Reverend Kirtley always said plainly showed the infernal origins of all his folk. Dr. Dapper stared into the silent woods after him for a time, and then wandered back to No Popery.

He knew that the Abenaki had taken in runaways and exiles from the various Sagadahock colonies; and he knew further that the Algonquians had no God-given laws concerning the properly submissive status of women. An Abenaki, Micmac, or Passamaquoddy woman might, in his undeniably limited experience, look away from a man, or past him, or through him, but never down at the ground. A woman of spirit and resource, such as Mistress Remorse Kirtley had shown herself to be, might well rise higher in Indian society than would ever be possible for her in Puritan surroundings. He wondered less how Rain Coming had learned of her decision than whether she herself knew of it yet.

The weather was warm still, but close to turning—after more than a year in Maine, even Dr. Dapper could tell this by the changes in the birds' behavior and the taste of the dawn wind—when he was roused from an evening doze by a rapping at his door. Peering through a crack in the wall which no amount of caulking would ever patch for long, he recognized, to his astonishment and immediate anxiety, the Reverend Kirtley. The minister had never once been to visit him at home, and their occasional conversations in church usually involved either the state of Dr. Dapper's immortal soul or Reverend Kirtley's highly mortal stomach. *Could he know? Could someone have . . . could she have confessed all?* The question

was heightened by the fact that the reverend was carrying a musket. It was a very large musket, with a mouth like a tulip.

But Olfert Dapper had not gained the rank and respect that he enjoyed in his mendacious art without learning (always with the exception of Margot Zeldenthuis) when to put his faith in a woman's eyes. His panic left him as swiftly as it had come, and he opened the door to welcome Giles Kirtley.

The minister entered with an oddly furtive air, looking over his shoulder as though he were the one well-acquainted with thief-takers and persons bearing heavy sticks and unreasonable grudges. Offered the one good chair, he leaned his musket gingerly against the wall, accepted a mug of somewhat dubious *jenever*—a thing Dr. Dapper could never remember having seen him do—and began the conversation by saying abruptly, as though the fact had just come to his attention, "Brother Dapper, you're a Dutchman."

Dr. Dapper raised his eyebrows and spread his hands. "I cannot deny it, sir."

"Ah." Reverend Kirtley cleared his throat several times. "Perhaps that is why I find it easier to confide in you, even though we have not been—ah—close? Warm? Intimate . . . ?" His voice wandered away into the random corners where his glance had gone.

"My loss, certainly," Dr. Dapper said graciously. "What can I do for you, Reverend?"

"My wife . . ." Reverend Kirtley stood up, turned in a constricted circle, like a bear tied for baiting, and sat down again. "My good wife has been kidnapped. Stolen away. By those red savages. *Savages*, man!"

Caught completely by surprise, Dr. Dapper could only blink and stare. "By the Abenaki? Kidnapped?"

"What else? *Who* else? There are tracks—obvious, unmistakable! They dragged her away in the night, poor creature, before she could utter a cry. Even now it may be too late to prevent . . ." He bent almost double in his chair, covering his eyes. The position was not unlike the one he usually screwed himself into when his stomach was demanding its due.

"*Prevent*," Dr. Dapper said; and then, "Oh. *Oh.* Well, we must certainly rouse the village, Reverend. If you take the houses east of Bear Creek, I will take all the west side—"

“No!” The Reverend Kirtley seized both of Dr. Dapper’s wrists in his big-knuckled hands. “I could not bear it if . . . if the worst were known to . . . to . . .”

“To all your congregation,” Dr. Dapper finished for him, more respectfully than he felt. “Your following of the faithful. Yes, of course, I understand. We will begin our search tomorrow, at first light—”

“*Tonight!* We dare not wait!” The reverend was on his feet again, reaching for his musket.

But Dr. Dapper shook his head firmly, and did not rise. “There are wolves out there, and catamounts—I heard one scream close by, yesternight. We can do nothing in darkness but run ourselves into worse danger than she may be in, trying to rescue her. I will go with you at first light, as I said.”

And with that the minister had to be content, though as he left Olfert Dapper’s house he added, “Remember to bring your gun.”

To which Dr. Dapper responded, “I have no gun. I do have an excellent belaying pin from the ship that brought me to these shores. But no gun.”

“I will have one for you,” Reverend Kirtley assured him grimly.

And so saying, he plunged out into the night, leaving Olfert Dapper sleepless until sunrise.

When they met at the empty church, Reverend Kirtley indeed handed Dr. Dapper a loaded musket. It felt so heavy and cold in his hand that he almost dropped it. He protested that he had never handled such a weapon before, and was likely to be more of a menace to any companion than to the supposed kidnappers of Mistress Kirtley. The reverend replied only, “The hand of the Almighty will be on the trigger at the appointed time. You need have no fear.”

But Dr. Dapper had a great deal of fear turning his own belly to a solid block of ice as they set forth, following the tracks—unmistakable, as the Reverend Kirtley had said—of Mistress Kirtley’s small, clumsily-shod feet to the point, just out of sight of No Popery village, where they crossed a set of moccasined footprints and went on in company with her companion . . . or her abductor. Mistress Kirtley’s prints were closer together now, showing only the balls of her feet, which could have meant she was either running or being dragged along. There was no doubt of the reverend’s opinion: his normally ruddy face was iron-pale, except for the blood-drops standing out on his bitten lips. He swung his musket from side to side, like a scythe, as

they walked on; and from time to time he sighted along it at random targets, grinding his teeth and grinning a wolf-grin. Olfert Dapper feared for everyone.

At one point, the Reverend studied him sharply—not quite swinging the musket around—and said, “You have a certain sympathy for the savages, or I am mistaken.” It was not a question.

Cautiously Dr. Dapper replied, keeping his tone carefully inexpressive, “I find them a not uninteresting people, and well worth studying.” As casually as he could, he edged around to the far side of the minister.

“Children of Satan,” Reverend Kirtley spat. “Whatever unspeakable, demon-born humiliation they have visited upon my wife, I will take her back *as* my lawful wife, with no shame ever on my part. But I shall kill every one of them, and I shall burn their filthy lodges to the ground, and plow the earth with salt afterward. This I swear.” He halted for a moment to glare fiercely at Dr. Dapper. “You have heard my oath before God.”

“Yes,” Olfert Dapper answered quietly. “I have heard you.”

The track of Mistress Kirtley and her presumed captor grew more difficult to follow as the ground hardened and the undergrowth became thicker. Whenever possible, Dr. Dapper did his best to scuff out a print with his foot, or to mislead the grim reverend; but the path to the Abenaki village was known to all the inhabitants of No Popery, and by now the minister had no need of a trail to lead him where he was convinced his wife must have been taken. It would take only a sight of Mistress Remorse Kirtley to unleash a massacre; and Dr. Dapper, born during the Eighty Years’ War, knew something about massacres. In frantic silence he rummaged through the stratagems and devious contrivances of a lifetime, but utterly in vain. He marched by the side of a man planning murder and could think of no way to stop him.

So despondent had he become that he never noticed the first cloven hoofmarks—neither the delicate prints of a whitetail deer, nor the dinner-plate tracks of a moose—joining those of the moccasins and work-booted feet. When he did finally become aware of them, at the point where they began to veer from the familiar path, heading together up a low, mossy rise of ground that bore all three prints clearly, he pointed them out to the minister, feeling the first twitch of a scheme in his belly as he did so.

“Behold, Reverend!” he cried, as dramatically as he knew how. “Whatever can you make of these uncanny slots?”

Giles Kirtley halted, leaning on his musket and shaking his head very slowly as he pondered the sudden new tracks. The cloven prints were generally in the middle of the path, with Mistress Kirtley’s close on the left side and those of the unknown Indian further off on the right. The Reverend was muttering, almost inaudibly, “I like this not . . . and yet it cannot, cannot . . .” At one point he bent to the ground to sniff at the hoofmarks; then raised his head, murmuring, as though he were alone, “*No* . . . I will not believe . . . *No. No* . . .”

Dr. Dapper followed, deliberately hanging a little way behind, to give the impression of growing reluctance at such ominous signs. The reverend did not look back for him, but kept advancing, step by heavy step, staring only at the earth, the musket loose in one hand; he might have forgotten completely that he was holding it at all. Olfert Dapper’s legs were beginning to trouble him, but he labored on, uncertain of everything except for the one hope that had blossomed in him, like a small bright coal to blow on in the night of great fear. *Remember—remember always—they must come to you, they must deceive themselves.*

Nearing the top of the rise, the Reverend Kirtley abruptly paused in his slow advance, pointing at the ground. “See, the savage’s tracks have vanished!” he declared, glowering directly at Dr. Dapper for the first time since they had begun their climb. “What can this mean?”

Bless me, God of Liars . . .

Hesitantly, almost mumbling himself, casting the fear he felt in another, more purposeful shape, Dr. Dapper gestured at the cloven marks and said, very quietly, “He walketh about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”

For a wonder, the minister did not immediately catch the reference. Then he did, and his face turned a sickly, feverish red, and then absolutely colorless once again. He whispered, “I felt . . . in my heart I felt the Lord’s warning, the Lord’s merciless pity . . . but I put my fears away . . .” He took a sudden fierce step forward and gripped Dr. Dapper by the collar, his strength a monster’s strength in that moment. Aloud, he cried, “But I smelled no brimstone when I stooped to the tracks! No brimstone—no hellish fumes at all! How do you explain *that*, physicker?”

Careful, careful . . . "If I remember the Holy Word correctly . . . which, doubtless, I do not"—Dr. Dapper smiled and ducked his head in embarrassment—"there is a mention of the Evil One having power to assume a pleasing appearance. May that not extend to—ah—scent, as well as looks? May not even the stink of Hell be at Satan's command, after all?"

The Reverend Kirtley shook his entire body like a tormented bear. "No, I cannot believe—I *refuse* to believe that the Devil could possibly touch . . . that she could be . . ." He did not finish the phrase, but hung his head for a long moment.

"I read my Testament in Dutch," Dr. Dapper said with pious humility, "which surely cannot match the mighty language of your King James Version—but does it not say that Satan hath no power over a pure heart?" He paused, mentally counting off seconds, before he pressed home. "How few of us can claim such a condition, when the full balance of sin is told?"

Forgive me, my maligned Mistress Remorse. Speak up for an errant Hollander in that other New World, when the time comes.

When the minister lifted his head again, Dr. Dapper felt a sudden qualm at the thought that he might glimpse tears in the wolf-eyes. But they were just as dry as before, and just as ruthlessly resolute. The Reverend Kirtley said only, "Follow on."

As they continued their slow advance toward the hilltop, Dr. Dapper heard the minister arguing endlessly with himself in a droning undertone. "But if the Devil took the savage on the spot, for what infernal purpose drag her along . . . why keep her alive, except as bait for the righteous—what purpose, what *purpose*?" Dr. Dapper noticed that the tracks of Mistress Kirtley's work-shoes had become fainter on the moss, while the cloven hoofs had cut steadily deeper into the soil, as though Satan had been stamping or even dancing in triumph at his catch. The Reverend Kirtley must have felt the same, for he groaned aloud, studying one such passage of signs; but then added aloud, "But she fought him, as we all must fight the Devil—the very earth itself bears witness to her battle. My poor sinful wife . . ." He was holding the musket in both hands again, across his chest.

At the top of the rise Mistress Kirtley's footprints vanished abruptly and completely into a bewildering swirl of the cloven marks. On witnessing this dreaded conformation of his fears, the minister uttered a single great raw cry and fell to his knees, clasping his hands and wailing hoarsely, "Oh, my

poor Remorse—her faith was not strong enough to save her! She struggled against her woman's weakness, but the Evil One snatched her up—he devoured her like a roaring lion! My poor lost child!" He was tearing at his long gray hair with one hand, at his shirt with the other, and blood followed his fingernails.

Dr. Dapper said nothing, but fell to studying the confused marks in the earth. He had known them from the first for the unicorn's prints—the Devil having, as everyone in Holland knew, one human foot and one clumsy, betraying cow-hoof—but his only explanation for the disappearance of Mistress Kirtley's tracks was that she must have mounted the unicorn, virgin or no, and ridden it . . . *where?* The trail was so confused that the hoofprints seemed to lead away in every direction from the hilltop, as though the unicorn itself had been the one dancing in celebration of their reunion.

Something lying on the ground caught the corner of his eye, and he knelt himself in a gesture of absentminded piety to pick it up, putting his musket down first as he did so. Almost invisible against the trampled moss, it proved to be a bit of the dark lace of Remorse Kirtley's bodice, cleanly severed, though by what he could not guess. He slipped it into the wallet at his belt without passing it to the reverend. *Mine.*

Reverend Kirtley was rocking to and fro on his knees, moaning unintelligibly to himself, as Olfert Dapper had known old Amsterdam Jews to do on the death of a parent or child. He crouched down beside him and placed a tentative hand on the broad, unyielding shoulder. Speaking instinctively in the intimate case, for only the second time in this country, he said, "Thou must be brave. Thou must pray for her and be brave."

The Reverend Kirtley's head whipped around to glare at him so fast that Dr. Dapper almost fell over backward. "Pray for one so lost to virtue as to fall into Satan's claws? Nay, to rail against the verdict of God is to risk damnation oneself, and I'll none of it." The minister's hoarse voice was painful to hear. "The judgments of the Lord are forever righteous," he said, and his eyes were not at all mad, but murderously sane.

"Surely," Olfert Dapper said, nodding fervently, though his own words came out in a choked whisper. "Surely, amen." He thought, *If I get out of this place alive, I will never leave the Netherlands again. I will never leave Utrecht again. I will never leave my house.*

As though he had caught the unspoken words, the Reverend Kirtley rose slowly to his feet, and all his attention was on Olfert Dapper. The musket did not swing to point directly at him, but neither was it pointing as much away from him as he would have preferred. The reverend said, “It is necessary that you leave No Popery this very day. I lament to say it, but I can brook no dispute.” The toneless words sounded like millstones grinding into motion.

“Today? Why today? What makes me . . . why am I suddenly become so unwelcome between one minute and the next?” But he already knew, which lent a certain hollowness to his protestations. *Of course. Hoist by your own petard, clever Dapper.*

“You have seen what you have seen, and it is vain to pretend that you fail to understand its import. The Evil One has taken my wife for his own—been *permitted* to take her, because she was clearly the weaker vessel of ”—to his credit, he did falter here—“of our household. Unworthy as I am, I remain the head of this greater household of No Popery, and it would not be advisable to have it known . . .” He made a slight helpless gesture with his hands, without finishing the sentence.

Considering that his passionate desire to leave Maine, Sagadahock, and this entire miserable outpost of ignorance and fear dated from his first day in No Popery, Dr. Dapper was astonished at the flare of genuine anger which possessed him at the minister’s words. He was close to losing English in his rage. “You for your wife care nothing, hypocrite you—only for your standing in this place, this . . . this”—and here he did use a Netherlandish word “that you call a village. Your wife is with the Duyvil better off than she was with you—”

At which point the Reverend Kirtley swung his musket viciously across Dr. Dapper’s face, knocking him down. He stared up into the bell-mouth of the musket and the minister’s strangely composed, almost expressionless visage. The Reverend Kirtley said, “I grieve to have had to injure you, my friend, but I could not permit you to continue abusing me in such a fashion.” He cocked his head to study Dr. Dapper’s face, clucking softly to himself. “I see your mouth is bleeding—I pray you, by your leave—” He reached out to wipe the blood away with the edge of a sleeve.

Dr. Dapper struck his hand away, which was not behavior he would ever have advised to anyone facing a madman armed with a musket and the

favor of God. He rose shakily to his feet and said, quietly but clearly, “No wonder your wife ran off with Heer Duyvil. Who would not?”

The musket came up sharply, but the Reverend Kirtley neither shot him nor struck him again. Equally calmly, he responded, “You see, obviously, why you must leave us, and leave directly.” It was not a question. The reverend said, “One such public declaration, even a mere rumor, born—as they always are—of a mere private thought . . . and confusion is come upon poor No Popery. You are a doctor—you understand about contagion. Confusion leads inevitably to chaos, sir, and chaos is the portal to Hell, as utter, unshakable faith is the threshold and fortress of Heaven. I cannot imagine, good Dutch Calvinist as you are, that you would gainsay me on that point.”

Dr. Dapper did not reply, but looked away, trying to focus on the maze of footprints surrounding them. His head was still ringing from the blow, and when he shook it to clear his vision his neck hurt. But it seemed clear at least that Remorse Kirtley had indeed ridden off on the unicorn, with Rain Coming—as he was somehow certain it must have been—mounted as well. Olfert Dapper imagined him with one hand tangled gently in the unicorn’s mane, his black eyes alight with the lost brilliance of long-dead stars. In his sly, sidestepping, faithless heart, Dr. Dapper whispered, “Go well. Yes.”

The Reverend Kirtley said briskly, “Isaac da Silva will be leaving at dawn.” Dr. Dapper knew the cross-grained old Portuguese peddler as sour company, but honorable enough in his trade. “He will carry you to where the Penobscot becomes navigable—from there, you should have no difficulty finding transportation downcoast to Falmouth, and a ship to take you wherever suits your fortune. Tonight, when you assemble such belongings as you may care to take with you”—he shrugged, and very nearly smiled—“I would consider it a kindness if you would leave behind some of your most excellent stomach medicaments. I have never known their like for immediate relief.”

“It would be my honor,” Dr. Dapper replied. “But if it should come to my attention that you have blamed the Abenaki people for your wife’s disappearance, or that they have been harmed in any way—”

The Reverend Kirtley nodded gravely. “You have my word.”

They walked back to the village of No Popery in silence, and parted there. The minister went home to a house that no longer held Mistress

Remorse Kirtley; and Olfert Dapper applied a bit of last winter's bear grease to his torn lip, then began to pack the few things he would bother to take along on his journey to whatever might await him in Holland. Prison, perhaps; perhaps Margot Zeldenthuis . . . Olfert Dapper had always recognized those moments when it was best to leave his fate to whims beyond his own.

It was a longer night's work than it should have been, considering how little he actually meant to take along. A handful of dried herbs . . . a small, extremely sharp knife . . . a jar of wild grape preserve (payment for setting and splinting a child's broken arm) . . . a couple of grotesquely abscessed molars . . . his pinewood mortar and pestle, the shallow bowl still containing a dusting of crushed tansy, the flower's camphor-like aroma lingering . . . a fragment of dark lace, carrying its own aroma . . . each of these was charged with a memory of this ridiculous, terrifying, terrifyingly beautiful new world that had unicorns in it. He was leaving with far more than he had brought.

When he was done, he sat on the front step—the only step, in fact—of his little house, built by his neighbors, and waited in the still-warm night for the grumble of Isaac da Silva's wagon wheels, which always sounded to him like the peddler's wearily complaining voice. Exhausted as he was, he had no expectation of sleep: the day had been too draining for that, and he felt as though he might never sleep again. All the same, his eyelids did drift closed from time to time—though never for long, to judge by the moon—and so it was that Rain Coming seemed to materialize out of nothing before him, as silent, as profoundly still, and as indubitably *present* as ever. Dr. Dapper did not rise to greet the Indian, but smiled, although it hurt his mouth. He said, "I will miss you."

He thought that Rain Coming nodded slightly, but he might have been wrong. He asked, "Is she with your people?" When that did elicit a nod, Dr. Dapper chided the Abenaki mildly, saying, "You see, you had it backward. She has come to you first, and I am only leaving now. It was you she went away with?"

Rain Coming definitely nodded this time. Olfert Dapper asked, "Will she be well with you?"

"Little time," Rain Coming responded. "Long time . . ." He shrugged and shook his head slightly. He said, "Sometime. Somewhere." He made a

gesture with both hands, as though he were pushing away the horizon.

"You mean that she has long journeys yet ahead of her?" Rain Coming did not reply. Dr. Dapper said slowly, "I am sad for her. Tell her that I wish . . ." But he had no idea what he would wish for Remorse Kirtley, and so he simply said, "Keep her safe while she is with you—and tell her that I will never forget her. Please tell her that."

"For you," the Abenaki said. He reached into the deerskin pouch that hung ever at his waist and produced, crumpled and slightly frayed on one side, the small Dutch-style cap that Olfert Dapper had never seen Mistress Kirtley without, except on the one occasion. He accepted it hesitantly, his throat suddenly too dry to thank Rain Coming for bringing the gift. He could only manage to nod himself, bending his head over the cap for a brief moment. There was no smell of her. He had hoped there would be.

Rain Coming had turned away before Dr. Dapper heard da Silva's wagon coming. He said, "The unicorn. I still do not know your word for it, but I know you have one." The Abenaki paused, but did not turn again. Dr. Dapper asked, "Did she . . . did you both ride it? I have imagined so."

Rain Coming looked back at him then, but said nothing. The peddler's wagon sounded closer; he tried not to think about what the ungreased axles would sound like during the long ride ahead. Raising his voice, he said, "I saw it twice, and I had no right, I know that. I should never . . . Did it . . . I mean, the creature—did it . . . do you think. . . ?" But he did not know what he meant to ask about the unicorn, any more than he knew what he wanted Remorse Kirtley's life to be, and so he never finished the question.

The night was dark yet, but a cock crowed sleepily in Schoolmaster Prouty's coop, and the bulk of Isaac da Silva's wagon was now visible as it neared Dr. Dapper's house. He rose to bring out his belongings; but realized as he did so that Rain Coming was still looking fully at him, and that the Abenaki's eyes had changed, becoming as they had been when they two had sight of the unicorn for the first time. Rain Coming's eyes were wide and young, brilliantly young as Dr. Dapper had never seen them, and so painfully clear that he could not look directly into them for long. Rain Coming said softly, "No more," and there was no sorrow or loss in his voice, but only an aching joy. "Never come back," he said again, almost singing it. "Never no more. Gone away."

Then he was gone too, and Isaac da Silva was demanding that Dr. Dapper get himself and his scraps of rubbish into the wagon immediately, if he thought he was going to stand there and let his fine horse get chilled.

Olfert Dapper rode all that first day facing backward, turning a woman's dowdy Dutch cap over and over between his hands. But the next morning he placed Mistress Remorse Kirtley's cap carefully into his pocket, and, sitting up beside the peddler, he set his face toward the sea.

Miracle on Main Street

Robert Arthur

I

DANNY WAS CROUCHED on the stairs, listening to the grown-ups talk in the living room below. He wasn't supposed to be there; he was supposed to be in bed, since he was still recovering from the chicken pox.

But it was lonely being in bed all the time, and he hadn't been able to resist slipping out and down in his wool pajamas, to hear Dad and Mom, and Sis and Uncle Ben and Aunt Anna talking.

Dad—he was Dr. Norcross, and everybody went to him when they were sick—and the others were playing bridge. Sis, who was in high school, was studying her Latin, not so hard she couldn't take part in the conversation.

They were mostly talking about other people in Locustville, which was such a small town most everybody knew everybody else, well enough to talk about them anyway.

"Locustville!" That was Mom, with a sigh. "I know it's a pretty town, with the river and the trees and the woods around it, and Tom has a good practice here, but the people! If only something would shake some of them out of themselves, and show them how petty and malicious and miserable they are!"

"Like Netty Peters," Dad said, his tone dry. Danny knew Miss Peters. Always hurrying over to some neighbor's to talk about somebody. Whisper-whisper-whisper. Saying nasty things. "She's the source of most of the gossip in this town. If ever there was a woman whose tongue was hinged in the middle and wagged at both ends, it's her."

Uncle Ben laughed.

"Things would be better here," he remarked, "if the money were better distributed. If Jacob Earl didn't own or have a mortgage on half the town, there might be more free thought and tolerance. But nobody in debt to him dares open his mouth."

"Funny thing," Dad put in, "how some men have a knack of making money at other men's expense. Everything Jacob Earl touches seems to

mint money for him—money that comes out of someone else's pocket. Like that gravel land he got from John Wiggins. I'd like to see the process reversed sometime."

"But for real miserliness"—that was Aunt Anna, indignant—"Luke Hawks takes all the prizes. I've seen him come into the Fair-Square store to buy things for his children, and the trouble he had letting go his money, you'd have thought it stuck to his fingers!"

"It's a question," Dad said, "which is worse, miserliness or shiftlessness. Miserliness, I suppose, because most shiftless people are at least good-hearted. Like Henry Jones. Henry wishes for more things and does less to get them than any man in Christendom. If wishes were horses, Henry would have the biggest herd this side of the Mississippi."

"Well, there are some nice people in Locustville," Sis broke into the conversation. "I don't care what that old gossip Miss Peters says, or that stuck-up Mrs. Norton either; I think Miss Avery, my English and gym teacher, is swell. She isn't awful pretty, but she's nice.

"There's little silver bells in her voice when she talks, and if that Bill Morrow whose dad owns the implement factory, and who takes time off to coach the football team, wasn't a dope, he'd have fallen for her long ago. She's crazy about him, but too proud to show it, and that silly Betty Norton has made him think he's wonderful by playing up to him all the time."

"If he marries Betty," Aunt Anna said, "the town won't be able to hold Mrs. Norton anymore. She's already so puffed up with being the wife of the bank president and the leader of the town's social life, she'd just swell up a little more and float away like a balloon if she got the Morrow Implement Company for a son-in-law."

Everybody laughed, and the conversation slowly died away.

Mom mentioned how much she disliked that two-faced Minerva Benson who was so nice to people's faces and worked against them behind their backs.

Sis said that Mr. Wiggins, who ran the bookstore, was a nice little man who ought to marry Miss Wilson, the dressmaker, a plain little woman who would be as pretty as a picture if she *looked* the way she *was*.

But he never would, Sis said, because he hadn't any money and would be ashamed to ask a woman to marry him when he couldn't even earn his own living.

Then they went back to bridge. Danny was feeling sort of weak and shaky, so he hurried back to bed before Mom could catch him. He crawled in and pulled the blankets up over him, and then his hand reached under the pillow and pulled out the funny thing he'd found in the old chest where he kept his games and skates and things.

It had been wrapped in a soft piece of leather, and he had found it in a little space behind one of the drawers. There was a name inked on the leather, *Jonas Norcross*. Dad's grandfather had been named Jonas, so it might have been originally his.

What the thing was was a little pointed piece of ivory, sharp at the tip and round at the bottom, as if it had been sawed off the very end of an elephant's tusk.

Only there was a fine spiral line in it, like in a snail's shell, that made Danny think maybe it hadn't come from an elephant, but from an animal he had seen in a book once—an animal like a horse, with one long horn over its nose. He couldn't remember the name.

It was all yellow with age, and on the bottom was carved a funny mark, all cross lines, very intricate. Maybe it was Chinese writing. Jonas Norcross had been captain of a clipper ship in the China trade, so maybe it might have come all the way from China.

Lying in bed, Danny held the bit of ivory in his hand. It gave out a warmth to his fingers that was nice. Holding it tight, he thought of a picture in his book about King Arthur's Round Table—a picture of Queen Guinevere of the golden hair. Probably it was a picture like that Sis had meant Miss Wilson ought to be pretty as.

Grown-ups' talk wasn't always easy to understand, the way they said things that weren't so.

Danny yawned. Gee, though, it would be awful funny—He yawned again, and the weight of drowsiness descending on him closed his eyes. But not before one last thought had floated through his mind.

As it came to him, a queer little breeze seemed to spring up in the room. It fluttered the curtains and rattled the window shade. For just a second Danny felt almost as if somebody was in the room with him. Then it was gone, and smiling at his amusing thought, Danny slept.

II

Henry Jones woke that morning with the smell of frying bacon in his nostrils. He yawned and stretched, comfortably. There was a clock on the bureau the other side of the room, but it was too much trouble to look at it.

He looked at where the sunshine, coming in the window, touched the carpet. That told him it was just onto nine.

Downstairs pans were rattling. Martha was up and about, long ago. And just about ready to get impatient with him for lingering in bed.

"Ho *huuuum!*" Henry yawned, and pushed down the covers. "I wish I was up an' dressed aw-ready."

As if it were an echo to his yawn, a shrill whickering sound reached him from the direction of his large, untidy backyard. Disregarding it, Henry slid into his trousers and shirt, his socks and shoes, put on a tie, combed his hair casually, and ambled down to the dining room.

"Well!" his wife, Martha, commented tartly, appearing in the doorway with a platter in her hands as he slumped down into his chair. "It's after nine. If you're going to look for work today, you should have been started long ago!"

Henry shook his head dubiously as she set the bacon and eggs in front of him.

"I dunno if I ought to go tramping around today," he muttered. "Don't feel so well. Mmm, that looks good. But I kind of wish we could have sausage oncet in a while."

From the rear yard came another high whinny that went unnoticed.

"Sausage is expensive," Martha told him. "When you get an honest job, maybe we can afford some."

"There's Hawks," Henry remarked, with interest, peering out the front window as a lean, long-faced man strode past the house, with a pleasant but shabbily-dressed little woman trotting meekly at his side. "Guess Emily has talked him into laying out some money for new things for the kids at last. It's only about once a year she gets him to loosen up."

"And then you'd think, to look at him, he was dying," his wife commented, "just because he's buying a couple of pairs of two-dollar shoes for two as nice youngsters as ever lived. He begrudges them every mouthful they eat, almost."

“Still,” Henry said, wagging his head wisely, “I wish I had the money he has stacked away.”

From the rear yard came a sound of galloping hooves. Martha was too intent on scolding Henry to notice it.

“Wish, wish, wish!” she stormed. “But never work, work, work! Oh, Henry, you’re the most exasperating man alive!”

“Martha, I’m not worthy of you,” Henry sighed. “I wish you had a better husband. I mean it.”

This time the whinnying behind the house was a concerted squeal from many throats, too loud to go unnoticed. Henry’s buxom wife started, looked puzzled, and hurried out to the kitchen. A moment later her screech reached Henry’s ears.

“Henry! The backyard’s full of horses! Plunging and kicking all over the place!”

The news was startling enough to overcome Henry’s early-morning lethargy. He joined his wife at the kitchen window and stared with popping eyes at the big rear yard.

It was full—anyway, it seemed full—of animals. Martha had called them horses. They weren’t exactly horses. But they weren’t ponies either. They were too small to be the one and too big to be the other. And they were covered with longish hair, had wild flowing manes, and looked strong and savage enough to lick their weight in tigers.

“Well, I’ll be deuced!” Henry exclaimed, his round countenance vastly perplexed. “I wish I knew where those critters came from.”

“Henry!” Martha wailed, clutching his arm. “Now there’s five!”

There had been four of them, trotting about the yard, nosing at the wreck of the car Henry had once driven, thumping with their hooves the board fence that penned them in. But now there were, indeed, five.

“G-gosh!” Henry gulped, his Adam’s apple working up and down. “We must have counted wrong. Now how do you suppose they got in there?”

“But what kind of horses are they, Henry?” Martha asked, holding to his arm still, as if for protection, in a way she hadn’t for years. “And who do you suppose they belong to?

Henry put an arm around Martha’s plump waist and applied reassuring pressure.

“I wish I knew, Martha,” he muttered, “I wish I knew.”

“Henry!” There was real fright in his wife’s voice. “Now there’s six!”

“Seven,” Henry corrected weakly. “The other two just—just sort of appeared.”

Together they gazed at the seven shaggy ponies that were trotting restlessly about the yard, nosing at the fence as if seeking escape from the limited space.

No more appeared; and seeing the number remain stable, Henry and Martha gained more self-possession.

“Henry,” his wife said with severity, as if somehow blaming him, “there’s something queer happening. Nobody ever saw horses like those in Indiana before.”

“Maybe they belong to a circus,” Henry suggested, staring in fascination at the seven uncouth beasts.

“Maybe they belong to us!”

“Us?” Henry’s jaw dropped. “How could they belong to us?”

“Henry,” his wife told him, “you’ve got to go out and see if they’re branded. I remember reading anybody can claim a wild horse if it hasn’t been branded. And those are wild horses if I ever saw any.”

Of course, Martha never *had* seen any wild horses, but her words sounded logical. Her husband, however, made no motion toward the back door.

“Listen,” he said, “Martha, you stay here and watch. Don’t let anybody into the yard. I’m going to get Jake Harrison, at the stable. He used to be a horse trader. He’ll know what those things are and if they belong to us, if anybody does.”

“All right, Henry,” his wife agreed—the first time he could remember her agreeing with him in, anyway, two years—“but hurry. Please do hurry.”

“I will!” Henry vowed; and without even snatching up his hat, he shot away.

Jake Harrison, the livery stable owner, came back with him unwillingly, half dragged in Henry’s excitement. But when he stood in the kitchen and stared out at the yard full of horses, his incredulity vanished.

“Good Lord!” he gasped. “Henry, where’d you get ’em?”

“Never mind that,” Henry told him. “Just tell me, what *are* they?”

“Mongolian ponies,” the lanky horse dealer informed him. “The exact kind of ponies old Genghis Khan’s men rode on when they conquered most

of the known world. I've seen pictures of them in books. Imagine it! Mongolian ponies here in Locustville!"

"Well," Martha asked, with withering scorn, "aren't you going out to see if they're branded? Or are you two men afraid of a lot of little ponies?"

"I guess they won't hurt us," the stable owner decided, "if we're careful. Come on, Henry, let's see if I'm still any good at lassoing. Mis' Jones, can I use this hank of clothesline?"

Henry opened the kitchen door and followed Jake Harrison out into the yard. At their advent the seven—he was glad to see the number hadn't changed in his absence—ponies stopped their restless trotting and lifted their heads to stare at the men.

Jake made a noose out of the clothesline and began to circle it above his head. The ponies snorted and reared, suspiciously. Picking the smallest one, the tall man let the noose go, and it settled over the creature's thick neck.

The pony's nostrils flared. It reared and beat the air with its unshod front hooves as the other six broke and scampered to the opposite end of the yard.

Jake Harrison drew the loop tight and approached the pony, making soothing sounds. It quieted, and as they came close let Jake put his hands on it.

"Yes, sir," the stable owner exclaimed, "a real honest-to-Homer Mongolian pony. That long hair is to keep the cold out, up in the mountains of Tibet. Now let's see if there's any brand. None on its hide. Let's see its hoof."

The pony let him lift its left forefoot without protest, and Henry, bending close, let out a whoop.

"Look, Jake!" he yelled. "It's branded! With my name! These critters are mine!"

Together they stared. Cut into the hard horn, in neat letters, was HENRY JONES.

Jake straightened.

"Yours, all right," he agreed. "Now, Henry, stop making a mystery and tell me where these animals came from."

Henry's jubilance faded. He shook his head.

"Honest, Jake, I don't know. I wish I did. . . . *Look out!*"

The tall man leaped back. Between them an eighth pony had appeared, so close that its flanks brushed against them.

"W-where—" Jake stuttered, backing away toward the door in the fence and fumbling for the catch. "Where—"

"That's what I don't know!" Henry joined him. "That's what I wish—No, I don't either! I don't anything at all!"

The phantom pony that had appeared directly before them, wispy and tenuous as darkish smoke, promptly vanished.

Henry mopped his face.

"Did you see what I saw?" he asked; and Jake, swallowing hard, nodded.

"You st-started to wish for something, and it st-started to appear," he gobbled, and thrust open the door in the board fence. "Let's get out o' here."

"When I started to wish—Oh, Jiminy Crickets!" Henry groaned. "That's how the others happened. When I wished. Do you suppose—Do you—"

Pale-faced, they stared at each other. Slowly the stableman nodded.

"Lord!" the ashen Henry whispered. "I never believed such a thing could happen. I wish now I'd never—"

This time the words weren't fully out of his mouth before the ninth pony struck the earth with a sudden plop directly before them.

It was too much. Henry broke and ran, and Jake followed at his heels. The pony, interestedly, chased them. Its brothers, not to be left behind, streamed through the opening in the fence, whickering gleefully.

When Henry and Jake brought up, around the corner of the house, they were just in time to look back and see the last of the beasts trotting out into Main Street. Nine wicked whinnys cut through the morning quiet. Nine sets of small hooves pounded.

"They're stampeding!" Henry shrilled. "Jake, we got to round 'em up before they do lots of damage. Oh, Jehoshaphat, I wish this hadn't ever happened!"

Neighing raucously, the tenth pony kicked up its heels, throwing dirt in their faces, and set off at a gallop after the others.

III

About the time Henry Jones was running for Jake Harrison, Luke Hawks was fingering a boy's woolen suit with lean, predatory digits.

“This be the cheapest?” he asked, and being assured that it was—all the clerks in Locustville knew better than to show him anything but the least expensive—nodded.

“I’ll take it,” he said, and grudgingly reached for his hip pocket.

“Don’t you think the material is kind of thin, Luke?” little Emily Hawks asked, a note of pleading in her voice. “Last winter Billy had colds all the time, and Ned—”

The man did not bother to answer. With the well-filled wallet in his left hand, he inserted thumb and forefinger and brought out a twenty-dollar bill.

“Here,” he said. “And I’ve got thirteen dollars forty cents coming.”

Taking the bill and starting to turn away, the clerk turned abruptly back. Luke Hawks had snatched the money from his hand.

“Is anything—” he began, and stopped. Testily the man was still holding out the note.

“Take it,” he snapped. “Don’t make me stand here waiting,”

“Yes, sir.” The clerk apologized, and took a firmer hold. But he could not take the bill from Luke Hawks. He pulled. Hawks’s hand jerked forward. Scowling, the lean man drew his hand back. The money came with it.

“What’s the matter, Luke?” Emily Hawks asked. Her husband favored her with a frown.

“Some glue on it, or something,” he muttered. “It stuck to my fingers. I’ll get another bill out, young man.”

He put the twenty back into his wallet—where it went easily enough—and drew out two tens. But neither would these leave his hand.

Luke Hawks was beginning to go a little pale. He transferred the notes to his left hand. But though his left hand could take them from his right, the clerk could take them from neither. Whenever he tugged at it, the money simply would not come loose. It stuck as close to Luke Hawks’s fingers as if it were part of his skin.

A red blush crept into the man’s cheeks. He could not meet his wife’s gaze.

“I—I dunno—” he muttered. “I’ll lay it down. You pick it up.”

Carefully he laid a ten dollar bill on the counter, spread his fingers wide, and lifted his hand. To his horror and fright, the bit of green paper came with it, adhering firmly to his fingertips.

“Luke Hawks,” his wife said sturdily, “it’s a judgment on you. The good Lord has put a curse on your money.”

“Hush!” Hawks warned, “Netty Peters has come in the store and is looking. She’ll hear you and go gabbing nonsense all—”

“It is not nonsense!” his wife stated. “It’s truth. Your money will not leave your fingers.”

Luke Hawks went deathly pale again. With a strangled curse, he snatched out all the money in his wallet and tried to throw it down on the counter. To his intense relief, one folded green slip fluttered down, though the rest remained in his hand.

“There!” he gasped. “It ain’t so! Boy, how much is that?”

The clerk reached for the paper.

“It—it’s a cigar coupon, sir,” he reported, his face wooden.

Luke Hawks wilted then. He thrust all his money into the ancient pigskin wallet and being careful his fingers touched only the leather, held it out to his wife.

“Here!” he directed, “You pay him, Emily.”

Emily Hawks folded her arms and looked straight into his frightened eyes.

“Luke Hawks,” she said in a firm, clear voice that carried through the entire store, “for eight years my life has been made a misery by your mean, grasping ways. Now you can’t spend any of your money. You’ll starve to death before you can even spend a nickel for bread.

“And I’ve a good mind to let you. If I don’t buy anything for you, you can be sure no one will give it to you. The people of this town would laugh themselves sick seeing you with your hands full of money, begging for a bite to eat. They wouldn’t give it to you, either.”

Luke Hawks knew they wouldn’t. He stared down at his wife, who had never before dared act like this.

“No,” he protested. “Emily, don’t say that. Here, you take the money. Spend it as you want. Get the things we need. I’ll leave it all to you. You—you can even get the next most expensive clothes for the boys.”

“You mean you want me to handle the money from now on?” Emily Hawks demanded, and her husband nodded.

“Yes, Emily,” he gasped. “Take it. Please take it.”

His wife took the wallet—which left Luke Hawks's hands readily enough—and counted the money in it.

"Five hundred dollars," she said aloud, thoughtfully. "Luke, hadn't you better give me a check for what you've got in the bank? If I'm to do all the buying, the money'll have to be in my hands."

"A check!" Luke exclaimed. "That's it! I don't need money! I'll pay by check."

"Try it," Emily invited. "That's the same as cash, isn't it?"

Luke tried it. The check would not leave his fingers either. It only tore to pieces when the clerk tugged at it.

After that, he capitulated. He took out his book and signed a blank check, which Emily was able to take. She then filled it in for herself for the entire balance in the bank—twenty thousand dollars, Luke Hawks admitted with strangled reluctance.

After that she tucked the check into the bosom of her dress.

"Now, Luke," she suggested, "you might as well go on home. I'll go to the bank and deposit this to my account. Then I'll do the rest of the shopping. I won't need you."

"But how'll you get the things home?" her husband asked weakly.

Emily Hawks was already almost to the door—out which Netty Peters had just dashed to spread the news through the town. But she paused long enough to turn and smile brightly at her pale and perspiring husband.

"I'll have the man at the garage drive me out with them," she answered. "In the car I'm going to buy after I leave the bank, Luke."

IV

Miss Wilson looked up from her sewing at the sound of galloping hooves in the street outside her tiny shop.

She was just in time to see a small swift figure race by. Then, before she could wonder what it was, she caught sight of herself in the big mirror customers used when trying on the dresses she made.

Her whole name was Alice Wilson. But it was years since anyone had called her by her first name. She was thirty-three, as small and plain as a church mouse—

But she wasn't! Miss Wilson stared openmouthed at her reflection. She—she wasn't mouse-like any longer. She was—yes, really—almost pretty!

A length of dress goods forgotten in one hand, a needle suspended in midair in the other, Alice Wilson stared at the woman in the glass. A small woman, with a smiling, pink and white face over which a stray lock of golden hair had fallen from the piled-up mass of curls on the top of head—curls that gave out a soft and shining light.

The woman in the mirror had soft, warm red lips and blue eyes of sky-azure clearness and depth. Alice Wilson stared, and smiled in sheer delight. The image smiled back.

Wonderingly, Alice touched her face with her fingers. What had happened? What kind of a trick were her eyes playing on her? How—

The clatter of hurrying footsteps made her jump. Netty Peters, her sharp face alight with excitement, her head thrust forward on her skinny neck like a running chicken's, ran in. Miss Wilson's dressmaking shop, the closest place to the Fair-Square store, was her first stop on her tour to spread the news of Luke Hawks's curse.

"Miss Wilson," she gobbled breathlessly, "what do you think—

"*She thinks you've come to spread some scandal or other, that's what she thinks,*" a shrill file-like voice interrupted.

The voice seemed to come from her own mouth. Netty Peters glared.

"Miss Wilson," she snapped, "if you think ventriloquism is funny when I'm trying to tell you—*just like you're going to tell everybody else!*" the second voice broke in, and Netty Peters felt faint. The words *had* come from her own mouth!

She put her hands to her throat; and because her mind was blank with fright, her tongue went busily ahead with what she had planned to say.

"I saw Luke Hawks—*just like you see everything*"—that was the shrill, second voice, alternating with her own normal one—"in the Fair-Square store and they—*were minding their own business, something you might do*—they were buying clothes for their poor starved children whom they treat so shamefully—*trust you to get that in!*—when Mr. Hawks tried to pay the clerk—*and you were watching to see how much they spent*—the money wouldn't leave his fingers—*did you ever think how many people would be happy if sometimes the words wouldn't leave your throat?*"

The town gossip ceased. Her words had become all jumbled together, making no sense, like two voices trying to shout each other down. There was a strange fluttering in her throat. As if she were talking with two tongues at the same time. . . .

Miss Wilson was staring at her strangely, and Netty Peters saw for the first time the odd radiance in Miss Wilson's hair, the new sweetness in her features.

Incoherent words gurgled in the older woman's throat. Terror glazed her eyes. She turned, and with a queer sobbing wail, fled.

Alice Wilson was still looking after her in bewilderment when another figure momentarily darkened the doorway. It was Mr. Wiggins, who owned the unprofitable bookstore on the other side of her dressmaking establishment.

Ordinarily Mr. Wiggins was a shy, pale-faced man, his thirty-eight years showing in the stoop of his shoulders, his eyes squinting behind thick glasses. He often smiled, but it was the small, hopeful smile of a man who didn't dare not to smile for fear he might lose heart altogether.

But today, this day of strange happenings, Mr. Wiggins was standing erect. His hair was rumpled, his glasses awry, and his eyes blazing with excitement.

"Miss Wilson!" he cried. "The most amazing thing has happened! I had to tell somebody. I hope you don't mind my bursting in to tell you."

Alice Wilson stared at him, and instantly forgot about the strange thing that had happened to her to be interested in Mr. Wiggins's experience.

"Oh, *no*!" she answered. "Of course I don't. I—I'm glad!"

Outside there were more sounds of galloping hooves, shrill squeals, and men's voices shouting.

"There seems to be a herd of wild ponies loose in the town," Mr. Wiggins told Miss Wilson. "One almost knocked me down, racing along the sidewalk as I was coming here. Miss Wilson, you'll never believe it, what I was going to tell you. You'll have to see for yourself. Then you won't think I'm mad."

"Oh, I'd never think that!" Miss Wilson assured him.

Scarcely hearing her, Mr. Wiggins seized her by the hand and almost dragged her to the door. A rush of warm pleasure rose in Miss Wilson's cheeks at the touch of his hand.

A little breathless, she ran beside him, out the shop door, down a dozen yards, and into the gloom of his tiny, empty bookstore.

On the way, she barely had a glimpse of three or four shaggy ponies snorting and wheeling further up the street, with Henry Jones and Jake Harrison, assisted by a crowd of laughing men and boys, trying to catch them.

Then Mr. Wiggins, trembling with excitement, was pushing her down into an old overstuffed chair.

"Miss Wilson," he said tensely, "I was sitting right here when in came Jacob Earl, not fifteen minutes ago. You know how he walks—big and pompous, as if he owned the earth. I knew what wanted. He wanted the thousand dollars I owe him, that I borrowed to buy my stock of books with. And I—I didn't have it. None of it.

"You remember when my aunt died last year, she left me property down by the river that I sold to Jacob Earl for five hundred dollars? He pretended he was just doing me a favor buying it, to help me get started in business.

"But then high-grade gravel was discovered on the land, and now it's worth at least fifteen thousand dollars. I learned Earl knew about gravel all the time. But in spite of that, he wanted the thousand loaned me."

"Yes, oh yes!" Miss Wilson exclaimed. "He would. But what did you *do*, Mr. Wiggins?"

Mr. Wiggins combed back his disheveled hair with his fingers. "I told him I didn't have it. And he took out his glove—his right glove—and told me if I didn't have it by tomorrow, he'd have to attach all my books and fixtures. And then he put his hand down on top of my little brass Chinese luck piece. And guess what happened?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" Miss Wilson whispered. "I never could!"

"Look!" Mr. Wiggins's voice trembled. He snatched up a large dust cloth that hid something on the counter just before Miss Wilson's eyes. Underneath the cloth was a squat little Chinese god, about a foot high, sitting with knees crossed and holding a bowl in his lap.

On his brass countenance was a sly smile, and his mouth was open in a round O of great amusement. And as Miss Wilson stared at him, a small gold coin popped out of the little god's mouth and landed with a musical chink in his lap!

Alice Wilson gasped. “Oh, John!” she cried, using Mr. Wiggins’s Christian name for the first time in her life. “Is it—is it money?”

“Chinese money,” Mr. Wiggins told her. “And the bowl is full of it. It’s filled just since I ran over to get you. One comes out of his mouth every second. The first one came out right after Mr. Earl put his hand on the god’s head. Look!”

He scooped up the contents of the bowl and held them out, let them rain into Miss Wilson’s lap. Incredulously she picked one up.

It was a coin as large perhaps as an American nickel. In the center was punched a square hole. All around the edges were queer Oriental ideographs. And the piece of money was as fresh and new and shiny as if it had just come from the mint.

“Is it real gold?” she asked tremulously.

“Twenty carats pure at least!” John Wiggins assured her. “Even if it is Chinese money, the coins must be worth five dollars apiece just for the metal. And look—the bowl is half full again.”

They stared wide-eyed and breathless at the little grinning god. Every second, as regularly as clockwork, another gold coin popped out of his open mouth.

“It’s as if—as if he were coining them!” John Wiggins whispered.

“Oh, it’s wonderful!” Alice Wilson told him, with rapture. “John I’m so glad! For your sake. Now you can pay off Earl.”

“In his own coin!” the man chortled. “Because he started it happening, you know, so you could call it his own coin. Perhaps he pressed a secret spring or something that released them from where they were hidden inside the god. I don’t know.

“But the funny thing is, he couldn’t pick them up! He tried to pretend he had just dropped the first couple, but they rolled out of the bowl and right across the floor when he reached for them. And then he began to get frightened. He grabbed up his hat and his glove and ran out.”

Then John Wiggins paused. He was looking down at Alice Wilson, and for the first time he really saw the change that had occurred in her.

“Why—why,” he said, “do you know, you hair is the same color as the coins?”

“Oh, it isn’t!” Miss Wilson protested, blushing scarlet at the first compliment a man had paid her in ten years.

"It is," he insisted. "And you, you're lovely, Alice. I never realized before how lovely. You're pretty as—as pretty as a picture!"

He looked down into her eyes, and without taking his gaze away, reached down and took her hands in his. He drew her up out of the chair, and still crimsoning with pleasure, Alice Wilson faced him.

"Alice," John Wiggins said, "Alice, I've known you for a long time, and I've been blind. I guess worry blinded me. Or I'd have known what I've just realized. I know I'm not much of a success as man but—but Alice, would you be my wife?"

Alice Wilson gave a little sigh and rested her face against his shoulder so that he might not see the tears in her eyes. Happiness had mostly eluded her until now but this moment more than made up for all the years that were past.

John Wiggins put his arms about her, and behind them the little god grinned and went busily on with his minting. . . .

Jacob Earl stamped into his library in his home and locked the door behind him, with fingers that shook a little.

Throwing his hat and stick down, with his gloves, onto a chair, he groped for a cigar in his pocket and lit it, by sheer force of will striving to quell the inward agitation that was shaking him.

But—Well, any man might feel shaken if he had put his hand down on a cold brass paperweight and had felt the thing twist in his grip as if alive, had felt a shock in his fingers like a sudden discharge of electricity, and then had seen the thing start to spout gold money.

Money—and Jacob Earl gazed down at his soft, plump white hands almost with fright—which had *life* in it. Because when he had tried to pick it up, it had eluded him. It had *dodged*.

Angrily he flung away his barely smoked cigar. Hallucinations! He'd been having a dizzy spell, or—or something. Or Wiggins had fixed up a trick to play on him. That was it, a trick!

The nerve of the man, giving him such a start! When he had finished with the little rabbit he—he—

Jacob Earl did not quite formulate what he would do. But the mere thought of threatening somebody made him feel better. He'd decide later what retaliation he would make.

Right now, he'd get to work. He'd inventory his strongbox. Nothing like handling hard, tangible possessions, like stocks and bonds and gold, to restore a man's nerves when he felt shaky.

He spun the combination of his safe, swung open the heavy outer door, unlocked the inner door, and slid out first a weighty steel cash box locked by a massive padlock.

Weighty, because it held the one thing a man couldn't have too much of —gold. Pure gold ingots, worth five hundred dollars each. Fifteen thousand dollars' worth of them.

He'd had them since long before the government called in gold. And he was going to keep them, government or no. If he ever had to sell them, he'd claim they'd been forgotten, and found by accident.

Jacob Earl flung open the lid of his gold cache. And his overly ruddy face turned a sudden pallid gray. Two of the ingots in the top layer were missing!

But no one could get into his safe. No one but himself. It wasn't possible that a thief—

Then the gray turned to ashen white. His eyes started, his breath caught in his throat. As he stared, a third ingot had vanished. Evaporated. Into thin air. As if an unseen hand had closed over it and snatched it away.

But it wasn't possible! Such a thing couldn't happen.

And then the fourth ingot vanished. Transfixed by rage and fright, he put his hands down on the remaining yellow bars and pressed with all his might.

But presently the fifth of his precious chunks of metal slipped away from beneath his very fingers into nothingness. One instant it was there, and he could feel it. Then—gone!

With a hoarse cry, Jacob Earl dropped the cash box. He stumbled across the room to his telephone, got a number.

"Doctor?" he gasped. "Doctor Norcross? This is Jacob Earl. I—I—"

Then he bethought himself. This couldn't happen. This was madness. If he told anyone—

"Never mind, Doctor!" he blurted. "Sorry to have troubled you. It's all right."

He hung up. And sat there, all the rest of the day, sweat beading his brow, watching the shiny yellow oblongs that had fallen on the floor vanish one

by one.

In another part of town, another hand crept toward the telephone—and drew back. Minerva Benson's hand. Minerva Benson had discovered her deformity almost the instant she had arisen, late that morning. The stiff, lifeless face affixed to the back of her head now. Thin, vicious, twisted, the features of a harpy.

With trembling fingers she touched it again, in a wild hope that it might have vanished. Then she huddled closer on the end of the sofa in the darkened room, whose door was locked, blinds drawn.

She couldn't telephone. Because no one must see her like this. No one. Not even a doctor. . . .

And in her tiny, spinsterish home Netty Peters also crouched, alone, and also afraid to telephone.

Feared, lest that strange, dreadful second voice begin to clack and rattle in her throat when she tried to talk, tried to ask Dr. Norcross to come.

Crouched, and felt her throat with fingers like frantic claws. And was sure she could detect something moving in her throat like a thing alive.

V

Mrs. Edward Norton moved along the tree-shaded streets toward the downtown section of Locustville with all the self-conscious pride of a frigate entering a harbor under full sail.

She was a full-bodied woman—well-built, she phrased it—and expensively dressed. Certainly the best-dressed woman in town, as befitted her position as leader of Locustville's social life and the most influential woman in town.

And today she was going to use her influence. She was going to have Janice Avery discharged as teacher in the high school.

Distinctly she had seen the young woman *smoking* in her room, the previous evening, as she happened to be driving by. A woman who should be an example to the children she taught.

Mrs. Norton sailed along, indignation high in her. She had called first at Minerva Benson's home. Minerva was a member of the school board. But Minerva had said she was sick, and refused to see her.

Then she had tried Jacob Earl, the second member of the board. And he had been ill too.

It was odd.

Now she was going directly to the office of Dr. Norcross. He was head of the school board. Not the kind of man she approved of for the position, of course—

Mrs. Norton paused. For the past few moments she had been experiencing a strange sensation of puffiness, of lightness. Was she ill too? Could she be feeling light-headed or dizzy?

But no, she was perfectly normal. Just a moment's upset perhaps, from walking too fast.

She continued onward. What had she been thinking? Oh, yes, Dr. Norcross. An able physician, perhaps, but his wife was really quite—well, dowdy. . . .

Mrs. Norton paused again. A gentle breeze was blowing down the street and she—she was being swayed from side to side by it. Actually, it was almost pushing her off balance!

She took hold of a convenient lamppost. That stopped her from swaying. But—

She stared transfixed at her fingers. They were swollen and puffy.

Her rings were cutting into them painfully. Could she have some awful—

Then she became aware of a strained, uncomfortable feeling all over her person. A feeling of being confined, intolerably pent-up in her clothing.

With her free hand she began to pat herself, at first with puzzlement, then with terror. Her clothing was as tight on her as the skin of a sausage. It had shrunk! It was cutting off her circulation!

No, it hadn't. That wasn't true. She was growing! Puffing up! Filling out her clothes like a slowly expanding balloon.

Her corset was confining her diaphragm, making it impossible to breathe. She couldn't get air into her lungs.

She had some awful disease. That was what came of living in a dreadful, dirty place like Locustville, among backward, ignorant people who carried germs and—

At that instant the laces of Mrs. Norton's corsets gave way. She could actually feel herself swell, bloat, puff out. Her arms were queer and hard to handle. The seams of her dress were giving way.

The playful breeze pushed her, and she swayed back and forth like a midnight drunk staggering homeward.

Her fingers slipped from the lamppost.

And she began to rise slowly, ponderously into the air, like a runaway balloon.

Mrs. Edward Norton screamed. Piercingly. But her voice seemed lost, a thin wail that carried hardly twenty yards. This was unthinkable. This was impossible!

But it was happening.

Now she was a dozen feet above the sidewalk. Now twenty. And at that level she paused, spinning slowly around and around, her arms flopping like a frightened chicken's wings, her mouth opening and closing like a feeding goldfish's, but no sounds coming forth.

If anyone should see her now! Oh, if anyone should see her!

But no one did. The street was quite deserted. The houses were few, and set well back from the street. And the excitement downtown, the herd of strange ponies that all day had been kicking up their heels as they dodged in and out of alleys, whinnying and squealing as Henry Jones and his volunteer assistants tried to pen them up, had drawn every unoccupied soul in Locustville.

Mrs. Norton, pushed along by the gentle breeze, began to drift slowly northward toward the town limits.

Tree branches scraped her and ripped her stockings as she clutched unavailingly at them. A crow, attracted by the strange spectacle, circled around her several times, emitted a raucous squawk that might have been amusement, and flew off.

A stray dog, scratching fleas in the sunshine, saw her pass overhead and followed along underneath for a moment, barking furiously.

Mrs. Norton crimsoned with shame and mortification. Oh, if anyone saw her!

But if no one saw her, no one could help her. She did not know whether to pray for someone to come along or not. She was unhurt. Perhaps nothing worse was going to happen.

But to be sailing placidly through the air, twenty feet above the street, puffed up like a balloon!

The breeze had brought her out to a district marked for subdivision, but still vacant. Fruit trees grew upon the land. The playful wind, shifting its quarter, altered her course. In a moment she was drifting past the upper branches of gnarled old apple trees, quite hidden from the street.

Her clothes were torn, her legs and arms scratched, her hair straggling down her back. And her indignation and fear of being seen began to give way to a sensation of awful helplessness. She, the most important woman in Locustville, to be blowing around among a lot of old fruit trees for crows to caw at and dogs to bark at and—

Mrs. Norton gasped. She had just risen another three feet.

With that she began to weep.

The tears streamed down her face. All at once she felt humble and helpless and without a thought for her dignity or her position. She just wanted to get down.

She just wanted to go home and have Edward pat her shoulder and say, "There, there," as he used to—a long time ago—while she had a good cry on his shoulder.

She was a bad woman, and being punished for it. She had been puffed up with pride, and this was what came of it. In the future, if ever she got down safely, she'd know better.

As if influenced by the remorseful thoughts, she began to descend slowly. Before she was aware of it, she had settled into the upper branches of a cherry tree, scaring away a flock of indignant robins.

And there she caught.

She had quite a lot of time in which to reflect before she saw Janice Avery swinging past along a shortcut from the school to her home, and called to her. . . .

Janice Avery got her down, with the aid of Bill Morrow, who was the first person she could find when she ran back to the school to get aid.

Bill was just getting into his car to drive out to the football field, where he was putting the school team through spring practice, when she ran up; and at first he did not seem to understand what she was saying.

As a matter of fact, he didn't. He was just hearing her voice—a voice that was cool and sweet and lovely, like music against a background of distant

silver bells.

Then, when he got it, he sprang into action.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Norton stuck up a tree picking cherries? I can't believe it."

But he got a ladder from the school and brought it, gulping at the sight of the stout, tearful woman caught in the crotch of the cherry tree.

A few moments later they had her down. Mrs. Norton made no effort to explain beyond the simple statement she had first made to Janice.

"I was picking cherries and I just got stuck."

Wild as it was, it was better than the truth.

Bill Morrow brought his car as close as he could and Janice hurried her out to it, torn, scratched, bedraggled, red-eyed. They got her in without anyone seeing and drove her home.

Mrs. Norton sobbed out a choked thanks and fled into the house, to weep on the shoulders of her surprised husband.

Bill Morrow mopped his forehead and looked at Janice Avery. She wasn't pretty, but—Well, there was something in her face. Something swell. And her voice. A man could hear a voice like that all his life and not grow tired of it.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, as he slid behind the wheel of his car. "And Betty Norton is going to look just like that someday. Whew! Do you know, I'm a fool. I actually once thought of—But never mind. Where can I take you?"

He grinned at her, and Janice Avery smiled back, little happy lines springing into life around the corners of her lips.

"Well," she began, as the wide-shouldered young man kicked the motor into life, "you have to get to practice—"

"Practice is out!" Bill Morrow told her with great firmness, and let in the clutch. "We're going some place and talk!"

She sat back, content.

VI

The sun was setting redly as Dr. Norcross closed his office and swung off homeward with a lithe step.

It had been a strange day. Darned strange. Wild ponies had been running through the town since morning, madly chased by the usually somnolent

Henry Jones. From his window he had seen into the bookstore across the street and distinctly perceived John Wiggins and Alice Wilson embracing.

Then there had been that abortive phone call from an obviously agitated Jacob Earl. And he had positively seen Mrs. Luke Hawks going past in a brand-new car, with a young man at the wheel who seemed to be teaching her to drive. Whew!

There would be a lot to tell his wife tonight.

His reflections were cut short as he strode past Henry Jones's backyard, which lay on his homeward short-cut route.

A crowd of townsfolk were gathered about the door in the fence around the yard, and Dr. Norcross could observe others in the house, peering out the windows.

Henry and Jake Harrison, mopping their faces with fatigue, stood outside peering into the yard through the cautiously opened doorway. And over the fence itself, he was able to see the tossing heads of many ponies, while their squeals cut the evening air.

"Well, Henry"—that was Martha, who came around the corner of the house and pushed through the crowd about her husband—"you've rounded up all the horses all right. But how're you going to pay for the damage they did today? Now you'll have to go to work, in spite of yourself. Even if they aren't good for anything else they've accomplished *that!*"

There was an excitement on Henry's face Dr. Norcross bad never seen there before.

"Sure, Martha, sure," he agreed. "I know I'll have to pay off the damage. But Jake and me, we've got plans for these hooved jackrabbits. Know what we're going to do?"

He turned, so all of the gathered crowd could hear his announcement.

"Jake and me, we're going to use that land of Jake's south of town to breed polo ponies!" he declared. "Yes, sir, we're going to cross these streaks of lightning with real polo ponies. We're gonna get a new breed with the speed of a whippet, the endurance of a mule, and the intelligence of a human. Anybody who seen these creatures skedaddle around town today knows that when we get a pony with their blood in it developed, it'll be something! Yes, sir, something! I wish—No I don't! I don't wish anything! Not a single, solitary thing! I'm not gonna wish for anything ever again, either!"

Norcross grinned. Maybe Henry had something there. Then, noting that the sun had just vanished, he was home.

VII

Up in his room, Danny Norcross woke groggily from a slumber that had been full of dreams. Half asleep still, he groped for and found the little piece of ivory he had kept beside him ever since he had fallen asleep the night before. His brow wrinkled. He had been on the stair, listening to the grown-ups talk. They had said a lot of queer things. About horses, and money, and pictures. Then he had gotten back in bed. And played with his bit of ivory for a while.

Then he had had a funny thought, and sort of a wish—

The wish that had passed through his mind, as he had been falling asleep, had been that all the things Dad and Mom and the others had said would come true, because it would be so funny if they did.

So he had wished that just for one day, maybe, all Henry Jones's wishes would be horses, and money would stick to Luke Hawks's fingers, and Jacob Earl would touch something that would coin money for somebody else for a change.

And, too, that Netty Peters's tongue really would be hinged in the middle and wag at both ends, and Mrs. Benson have two faces, and Mrs. Norton swell up and blow around like a balloon.

And that Miss Wilson would really be as pretty as a picture, and you could truly hear silver bells when Miss Avery talked.

That had been his wish. But now, wide awake and staring out the window at a sky all red because the sun had set, he couldn't quite remember it, try as he would. . . .

Crouched in her darkened room, Minerva Benson felt the back of her head for the hundredth time. First with shuddering horror, then with hope, then with incredulous relief. The dreadful face on the back of her head was gone now.

But she would remember it, and be haunted by it forever in her dreams.

Netty Peters stared at herself in her mirror, her eyes wide and frightened. Slowly she took her hands from her throat. The queer fluttering was gone. She could talk again without that terrible voice interrupting.

But always after, when she began to speak, she would stop abruptly for fear it might sound again, in the middle of a sentence.

"I've decided, Luke," Mrs. Luke Hawks said with decision, "that we'll have the house painted and put in a new furnace. Then I'm going to take the children off on a little vacation.

"No, don't say anything! Remember, the money is in my name now, and I can spend it all, if I've a mind to. I can take it and go away to California, or any place. And no matter what you say or do, I'm not going to give it back!"

Jacob Earl uttered a groan. The last gold ingot had just vanished from the floor of his library.

John Wiggins turned. The tiny *chink-chink* that had sounded all afternoon had ceased. The little god still grinned, but the coins were no longer coming from his mouth.

"He's quit," the little man announced to the flushed and radiant Alice Wilson. "But we don't care. Look how much money came out of him. Why there must be fifteen thousand dollars there!

"Alice, we'll take a trip around the world. And we'll take him back to China, where he came from. He deserves a reward."

With the red afterglow tinting the little lake beside which he had parked the car, Bill Morrow turned. His arm was already about Janice Avery's shoulders.

So it really wasn't any effort for him to draw her closer and kiss her, firmly, masterfully.

The door to Danny's room opened. He heard Dad and Mom come in, and pretended for a minute that he was asleep.

"He's been napping all day," Mom was saying. "He hardly woke up enough to eat breakfast. I guess he must have lain awake late last night. But his fever was down, and he didn't seem restless, so I didn't call you."

"We'll see how he is now," Dad's voice answered; and Danny, who had closed his eyes to try to remember better, opened them again.

Dad was bending over his bed.

"How do you feel, son?" he asked.

"I feel swell," Danny told him, and struggled to a sitting position. "Look what I found yesterday in my box. What is it, Dad?"

Dr. Norcross took the piece of ivory Danny held out, and looked at it.

"I'll be darned!" he exclaimed to his wife. "Danny's found the old Chinese talisman Grandfather Jonas brought back on the last voyage of the *Yankee Star*. He gave it to me thirty years ago. Told me it had belonged to a Chinese magician.

"Its peculiar power, he said, was that if you held it tight, you could have one wish come true, providing—as the Chinese inscription on the bottom says—your mind was pure, your spirit innocent, and your motive unselfish. I wished on it dozens of times, but nothing ever happened. Guess it was because I was too materialistic and wished for bicycles and things. Here, Danny, you can keep it. But take good care of it. It's very old; even the man who gave it to Grandfather Jonas didn't know how old it was."

Danny took back the talisman.

"I made a wish, Dad," he confessed.

"So?" Dad grinned. "Did it come true?"

"I don't know," Danny admitted. "I can't remember what it was."

Dad chuckled.

"Then I guess it didn't come true," he remarked. "Never mind; you can make another. And if that one doesn't happen either, don't fret. You can keep the talisman and tell people the story. It's a good story, even if it isn't so."

Probably it wasn't so. It was certain that the next time Danny wished, nothing happened. Nor any of the times after that. So that by and by he gave

up trying.

He was always a little sorry, though, that he never could remember that first wish, made when he was almost asleep. But he never could. Not even later, when he heard people remarking how much marriage had improved Alice Wilson's appearance and how silvery Mrs. Bob Morrow's voice was.